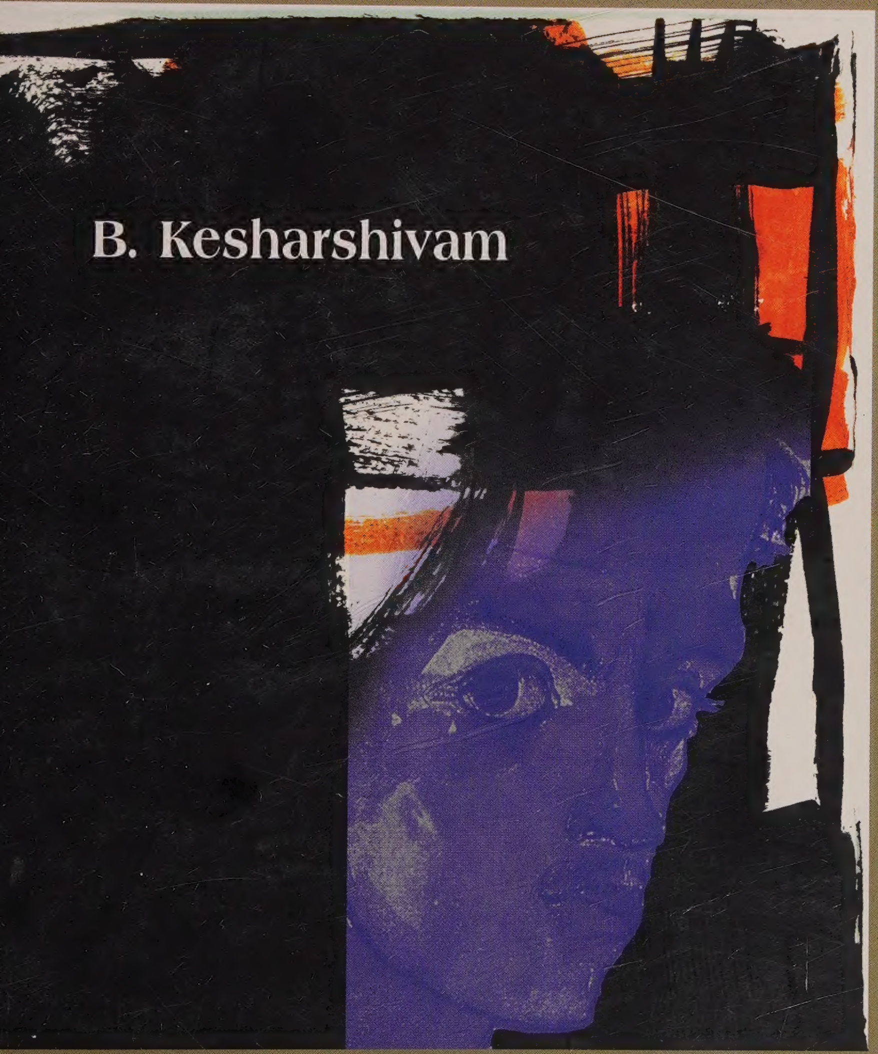
The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth

A Dalit's Life



B. Kesharshivam

Translated from the Gujarati by Gita Chaudhuri

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The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth

Also by the author

Novels

Shool (Thorn), May 1995
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Patni (Wife), October 2004

Collection of Essays

Gai-jo-Dero (Cows' Hill), 2000
Hayatina Hastakshar (Signature of Existence), 2007

Collection of Short Stories

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and

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Samya

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To those children who
In coal mines, soot, and ash,
Furnaces and masonry . . .
Bathe in the dust of sand, lime and cement,
And carry the stinking leather from the tanneries,
The worm-infested bones from the bone mill;
And
In the modern social order—
In hotels, schools, hostels
And in the abode of the pseudo-religious
Become a victim of abuse,
And under the shadow of
Pain, misery, vulnerability, endurance—
Breathe, writhe . . .

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On the Occasion of the Book Being Translated into English

The religious divide between the Hindus and Muslims has always existed. The riots that have taken place in the past were primarily fought between the high caste Hindus and the Muslims. There has always existed an understanding between the dalits and the Muslims: they live near each other; they work together; both are poor. If the caste Hindus hate the Muslims, then they hate the dalits as well. Muslims and dalits are openly meat-eaters. In the grand scheme of a Hindu nation envisaged by the Hindus, both the Muslims and the dalits are marginalized.

The 2002 Godhra riots, however, present a strange and grim picture. In these riots, the dalits were pitted against the Muslims. The dalits were told that they were Hindus, and rumours were spread that because of being considered as Hindus, the Muslims raped their sisters and daughters. As a result, for the first time, dalits and Muslims, who had maintained a neutral position in the past, came directly into conflict.

The caste system and untouchability, a feature of Hinduism for such a long time, entered other religions as well. In the past, the people of other religions did not believe in untouchability, but after coming into contact with the Hindus, they too started to discriminate against dalits. Dr. Ambedkar had to vacate a lodge in which he was staying; it was owned by a Parsi. Those dalits who have converted to Christianity have separate graveyards. Muslims have also started to begun to regard dalits as 'low'.

Gujarat is the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi whose ashram is situated in Ahmedabad. Two anti-reservation riots have taken place

in Gujarat, in which dalits have had to face heavy loss of life and property. Many people are bathed in an ideology of superiority and suppression.

The former President R. K. Narayanan expressed his view that there should be reservations for the dalits in the judiciary. Against this, not only the newspapers, but also the judiciary itself protested. I have read in the newspapers that in Lucknow, after a dalit magistrate was transferred, the non-dalit magistrate who came in his place had the chair washed with Ganga water to purify it. In a case, a judge released the accused, and in his judgement he said, 'Rape is generally done by youths. These accused are of middle age, and should be respected. They cannot have committed the crime. No person from the higher castes would rape a woman from the lower castes and degrade his own caste.' Rajasthan's Bhanvari Devi's case (an OBC woman who was a social activist and was gangraped by upper caste men in 1995, aiming to intimidate and counter social activism), is at present pending in the Supreme Court.

On the issue of entering a temple, the late Mooldas Vaishya, a dalit, had launched a satyagraha in 1948 for entering the Swaminarayan temple at Ahmedabad. The members of the Swaminarayan sect filed a case to prevent such people from entering the temple; in 1951, the trial court gave the judgement in favour of the priests. Vaishya then went to the High Court of Bombay, and cited the Bombay Harijan Temple Entry Act of 1947 and the Untouchability Offences Act of 1955. The case finally reached the Supreme Court, where the judgement was given in favour of Mooldas Vaishya, *after an interval of eighteen years*, in 1966. This is the reality, despite various protective acts of the Constitution. For a dalit, simple things like an entry into a temple or a bus or a hotel also requires an intense struggle.

Recently, the proposal by the government to introduce reservations in the private sector has elicited a strong reaction.

Even now, a dalit woman is stripped and paraded naked in the village. A marriage between a dalit and a non-dalit is not always possible, and if it does take place, then often the dalit has to pay with his life.

I have been an officer of a high rank; I have received higher education from a university; I am also a writer. Yet a tenant living in my house still had the audacity to call me a *dhhed*;[1] he said, 'You are a dhhed. A dhhed will always remain a dhhed! Now go to the court and file a case of atrocity against me.'

22 January 2008 B. Kesharshivam

[1] Particularly degrading abuse. See also note on Chapter 1.

Signature of Existence

When I read in the newspapers that the children in the refugee camps of Kampuchea had lost their ability to cry I was reminded of my childhood. We had the ability to cry but we were not allowed to cry. There were many restrictions: ban on education, ban on listening to religious discourse, ban on wearing good clothes . . . The only thing which was not banned was hunger—our childhood had passed in craving for a quarter of a rotlo. I have witnessed a childhood where the pieces of bones, horns and hooves of dead cattle in the bone meal factory were playthings and I have also seen the same childhood disappear under the collapsed wall of that factory. I have always heard my own cries in the shrieks of children dying in cyclones, droughts, accidents or earthquakes. In the coal mines, in the steel furnace, amidst the dust of the cement factory, I found as if it were I who were being forced and exploited to hard labour to fill my belly. I have been roasted in the heat of the boiler and I feel my body has been woven in the warp and weft of the carpet. Today, too, there is inhuman exploitation of children. The childhood of many young boys get crushed while working as waiters in eating joints as they attempt to help their family, and their dried blood stains their torn pants. The boarding houses of the so-called religious institutions also do not hesitate to abuse their wards physically and most public gatherings use the school and college youths as audience and depend on them for the success of their events. Some days back I saw two advertisements on TV: one, where small boys were shown breaking stones, and in the second one, a frightened girl was shown hiding in

a corner, leaving her books behind. The message it carried was one of protecting oneself from the men of the family. 'Break the silence,' the message was bold and clear. Recently I read two volumes by the famous writer Taslima Nasreen: the first volume of her autobiography—*My Girlhood* (I read the Hindi translation by Amar Goswami, *Mere Bachpan ke Din*, Vani Prakashan, from the Bengali original, *Amar Meyebela)* and *For The Rights of a Woman.* In Bangladesh, *My Girlhood* is banned. Nasreen is a great defender of 'human truth' and 'individual freedom' in literature. She has described in her book how as a ten-year-old child she had been subjected to cruel sexual abuse by her own maternal uncle. By depicting this cruel, hard, and naked truth she has exposed the brutality, baseness, uncontrolled power and lewdness of men. In her words:

> I picked up a matchbox and came out of my room. I felt a pain between my thighs. I wanted to pee but then I found my panties wet with urine. I did not know the name of the game of becoming naked. I couldn't understand why Sharaf Mama and Aman Chacha would mount on me. Chacha has told me not to tell anyone about it. At the age of seven I suddenly understood that this was a shameful act and should not be told to anybody. These were dark secrets. (p 102)

This is the reason why there is an urge to break silence in the advertisement. This exposure of our culture should make any father bow his head in shame! It proclaimed even childhood was not safe within the walls of one's house. Hasn't Jean Paul Sartre too echoed this feeling in his autobiography *Words*, 'the entire patriarchy rots.' Will the entire society rot and stink in the face of startling revelation of decreasing population rate of women that has emerged from the last census data?

For me existentialism was throbbing between the pulls of helplessness and endurance and was giving way to pessimisms. I have never been able to forget the sentence from the film *Humlog* that I had seen in my childhood: 'The lamp which has no oil has no right to be lit.' Dalits used to light their lamps with the fat of dead cattle

(ancient man too had lit the first lamp with dead cattle's fat), but even this lamp had no right to spread its light. Sartre's *Words* depicted society as it existed when he was six years old. In *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* too I have tried to describe society as I had found it when I was six years old. Sartre has described the situation after the World War II. But in this country though the Great War had long ended, the centuries-old mental crusade had not ended. The country and Gujarat have seen its ugliness and its brutal frightening form during the reservation riots. Somebody once remarked, 'Untouchability is a putrid sore of Hindu society.' This sore has been rotting for centuries. This land has produced many sages, religious leaders, mendicants and enlightened souls but many among them have only been pretenders. Nobody treated this sore, nobody tried to cut it with a knife. As a child I had heard the sound of the sharpening of the knives and had seen these knives slice the bones at one stroke, and yet nobody has so far been able to cut open the wound of untouchability.

In the introduction of my novel *Shool* (The Thorn), I have talked about some of my experiences of poverty and deprivation as a child. Reading these incidents, a prominent religious leader wrote to me, 'We have also undergone similar trials and tribulations in our childhood.' Was he jealous of my sufferings! I do not deny his sufferings but did he also have to face the helplessness, indifference and caste-related taunts that I had to put up with constantly? In every walk of my life, whether working as a labourer or as a student, I had to hear caste-based remarks like, 'Move aside, can't you see?', 'acquired quite an air, haven't you?', 'government's son-in-law', and so on. The religious leader had the crutch of a begging bowl but I never resorted to begging to satiate my hunger. I have gone to bed hungry but have never asked for alms from anybody. The writing of this autobiography has been a hard test for me. I was constantly plagued with the question: what was the point in remembering the painful past? Today there is such a hue and cry about the 'creamy layer' of the dalit class. But does anyone realize how arduous and painful the journey to reach this creamy layer has been? And yet at

the end, the shool has not been removed. It continues to pierce.

Initially, some chapters of *Purnasatya* (the title of the autobiography that was originally written in Gujarati) were published in the following journals: *Budhiprakash, Navchetan, Naya Marg, Disha, Vee, Vishram* and *Akhand Anand.* The editor of *Naya Marg* had sent me a letter of agreement of publishing one chapter every month in his journal and had also published two chapters. He had sent me Rs150 for it too. Then *Disha* started to publish it in weekly instalments. Mr. Muljibhai Khuman of *Disha* was very supportive. Mr. Joseph Macwan, Mr. Prakashbhai Shah, Mr. Mukundbhai Shash, Mr. Madhusudan Parekh, Mr. Indubhai Jani, Mr. Shashikant Naik and other writer friends read chapters of the book and encouraged me to publish it. I want to express my deep gratitude to these writers and journals for helping me in my endeavour.

Mr. Joseph Macwan had suggested the title *Shaishavni Sarane* (On the Grinding Stone of Childhood) for the autobiography. Mr. Vijayshankar Dave had put his stamp of approval on it. Mr. Keshubhai wrote a foreword for it on 1 January 1995 and urged me to publish it. He had also suggested writing a novella based on it. I had started a novel but could not complete it because I was transferred to a new place where the workload was very heavy. But I did write some ten short stories which were published in *Mumbai Samachar, Jansatta, Sambhav, Budhiprakash, Vishram, Chahna, Akhand Anand, Jalaram Deep, Avsar, Dhabkar, Rakheval* ,and *Indumouli*. I have written about it in the introduction to my short story collection *Rati Rayan ni Ratash*. I wanted to publish the stories first because I had thought that the autobiography could be published later. Thus though the autobiography was completed in 1994, it was not published then. Meanwhile, a friend said to me, 'Why don't you get it reviewed by Mr. Ramanlal Pathak? He is a harsh critic and doesn't hesitate to express his frank opinion even to a friend. He will give you a balanced evaluation of your book.' I had never met him, yet I sent him the manuscript of *Purnasatya*. On the fourth day I received his letter. He wrote, 'I received your reminiscences of childhood two days back. I found it so engrossing that I read 101 pages at one sitting. It is very

interesting. Congratulations!' Some of the pages of the manuscript were torn and not properly arranged. He had taken the pains to arrange them in order and after about a week he also wrote an introduction and sent it to me.

From *On the Grinding Stone of Childhood* the autobiography became *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* because not merely my childhood but my entire life has been on the grinding stone. As my life was being sharpened on the grinding stone of existence, the centuries-old social customs were trying to blunt it constantly. In this battle I was fortunate to find the great warrior Dr. Ambedkar as my guide. He had preferred to remain hungry than give up his studies. He had suppressed his physical hunger to satiate his mind's hunger. I had his photograph in my house and I constantly carried another in my pocket. The photograph has always been a great source of inspiration for me. Once when I had taken it out from my pocket, a teacher saw it and he became angry with me. The conditions in Gujarat had been very different then but without going into details I want to state that this truth was present all around me. Mulk Raj Anand had written *Untouchable* in Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Ashram in close association and under the guidance of Gandhiji. This novel was translated into fourteen languages of the world but it had not been translated in Gujarati till he requested Dr. Ranjana Harish to do it. Was *Untouchable* something untouchable for the Gujarati language? In all my activities—reading, writing, and meeting writers I have encountered this truth. It shows its power even when I am outside Gujarat. I have always had to confront this truth. I have witnessed it right from my childhood—at the time of a dalit's entry into an upper caste tea stall, or entry inside a bus, a temple or the mill canteen. In all these agitations I had seen the staff being raised to curb the protest. I had even suffered at a personal level: my arm had become numb at the sudden impact of a blow from a stick because I had dared to cross the road where Mataji's garbi—the earthen lamp of the Goddess—had been placed.

Autobiography or autobiographical tales portray in words the true picture of the wounds inflicted on the body and the mind. Once I

found it painful to go on my regular morning walk. The sole of my foot hurt badly; I had worn Bata's padded *Quovadis* sandals and yet it was very painful. When I examined my sole after coming home, I found a corn had developed. As a child I had roamed barefoot in the field and at that time a thorn had pierced my sole. Dalits were banned from wearing shoes! Today that broken thorn had turned into a corn and was hurting me. I tried to remove the thorn with a needle but the more I tried to dig it out, the more it hurt. I put the needle aside. Based on this incident, I wrote a short story depicting a dalit's life called *Kheel* (The Corn) which was published in *Budhiprakash*. Sometimes while walking fast under the pressure of work, my feet and knees ache, and I am reminded of how I had to run carrying the heavy basket of coal and ashes as a young boy. Sometimes in the bitter cold in winter the pain in an arm would remind me of the numbed hand of my childhood and tears would well up in my eyes. The marks of the dog's bite, where it had bitten off a piece of flesh from my leg, were still visible. These are marks that can be seen, but deep wounds on the heart are invisible—I cannot show them, like Lord Hanuman, by tearing my chest apart. In the introduction to *Rati Rayan ni Ratash* I wrote about dalit literature:

> If you were to knock on the words of pain, you would hear the sound of truth; if you were to press the words, you would find drops of perspiration oozing out; and if you were to dig into them, you would find blood streaking out.

The ghost of untouchability has haunted us for long. Gujarat has witnessed two riots on the issue of reservation. During those days I visited my moholla, where my childhood had blossomed and my youth had bloomed. A mob of around forty thousand people had surrounded my beloved moholla and pelted it with stones. There were rumours of setting fire to the colony at night and we had kept an all night vigil. At every step, at every breath, that thorn continues to pierce the heart and even now among dalits there are incidents of migration and fleeing from one's homeland. When I remember I get

goose bumps. Watching the carnage of the two riots on reservation I had shed tears of blood. All my life I have had to walk on the sharp edge of the sword. That is why I have found truth difficult to accept, and that is also the reason for changing the title of my autobiography from *On the Grinding Stone of Childhood* to *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth*. I decided after discussing with Mr. Ramanlal Pathak and Mr. Keshubhai Desai to exclude a chapter because they found it improper. This chapter was later published in *Disha* without carrying my name! There was nothing vulgar or obscene in the chapter—it only attempted to portray the truth. I had nothing to hide. I wanted *The Whole Truth* to contain nothing but the truth!

I have not allowed any distortion of facts in the depiction of the life I have lived to make *The Whole Truth* a work of art. Life itself is a work of art. Mr. Muljibhai Khuman of *Disha* and Dr. Keshubhai Desai had asked me to include the events following my childhood in the autobiography. But pessimism had spread in the every pore of my body and so I had thought:

> What is the point of writing? Who'll read it? And what'll happen after it has been read? After death everything will remain as it is here.

Untouchability like the epic curse had not ceased to pursue me. I was destined to lead a very contradictory life. As a child I had experienced a childhood hankering for a piece of rotlo and as an adult, in my job at Raj Bhavan, I had food cooked referring to the cookbooks that cost Rs200 to Rs250. I had a huge staff of separate cooks for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, cook mates, butler, and so on. I had to organize lunch and dinner parties and 'at home' parties on 15 August and 26 January for 1,500 to 2,000 guests. I had to look after the well-being of the celebrity guests like the president, the prime minister and other VIPs. I was also in charge of the gardens and supervised the decor of Raj Bhavan. For a person like me who was born in a mud plastered house with a tiled roof, these were complex tasks, but I was able to carry out my duties with success. In my personal life I

experienced marital happiness, the arrival of children and also various family conflicts, but along with it the routine of 10.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. job cycles also went on. I feel in one life I have lived many lives and that is why I have taken the liberty of writing this autobiography and narrating the stories of my many selves.

Once when Pandit Rahul Sankrityayan was touring Russia, a Russian while shaking his soft effeminate hands had said, 'Panditji, here looking at your soft palm people would think you've shirked work.' In Russia people eulogized hard work and labour. In France during the French Revolution the revolutionaries hunted and killed the upper class and the nobles. These noblemen used to dress and pretend to be the working class to avoid the wrath of the revolutionaries. But the revolutionaries were clever. They would examine everybody's palms and those with soft effeminate palms were killed. Hard physical labour hardens the palms. The hard labour in my childhood had hardened my palms and even today I can feel the hardened part. As a child, many would have felt the hardness while shaking hands with me!

Gandhiji had urged people to use simple language: one that even a *koshiyo* (a farmer who waters his field using a *kosh* or leather pouch) can understand. It is a different matter that the koshiyos today move around in Maruti cars and perhaps after the Narmada Project becomes functional some of them might even own aircrafts! I have tried to follow his advice and have attempted to write in such a way that even the marginalized girl in society is able to understand it!

On 15 August 1999 I was invited to the 'at home' party at Raj Bhavan, and I met a minister there who asked me what I intended to do after retirement. Then he said, 'Please give me your bio data.' Many ministers before him had taken my bio data. I suddenly thought of writing a book based on my bio data and then I wrote one wherein I included the most memorable experiences of my service period. When it was ready, Mr. Jayeshbhai of *Navbharat Sahitya Mandir* decided to include it as the second part of *Purnasatya*, and I'm greatly indebted to Jayeshbhai for doing so.

Finally I want to end by quoting Kafka's words used to describe

Sartre's lifelong pain after Sartre's death in 1983: 'His pain was like that of Jesus' bleeding heart. Every day the wound is cleaned and every day it bleeds again. Sartre too was subjected to this pain.'

Untouchability is the bleeding heart of the poor. But instead of washing this wound, it is poked continuously! We have been continuously suffering from this wound.

14 April 2001 B. Kesharshivam
Dr. Ambedkar's Birth Anniversary
Shool, Gandhinagar

Introduction

The time is sometime between 1899 and 1915, during the sixteen-year spell of the worst ever famine in Gujarat. Gujarati literature abounds in heartrending tales of the victims of this famine. Pannalal Patel's immortal *Manvi ni Bhavai* bears testimony to the agonizing suffering of the people. But almost a century after this event a dalit Gujarati writer B. Kesharshivam notes in his autobiography:

> Pannalal Patel's description of the *chhappania* famine in *Manvi ni Bhavai* is in fact an underestimation of the situation.[1] The reality was much more horrendous. I have heard heartrending tales of this famine from the old people of the dalit community. During this famine a large number of cattle had died and the dalits used to cook the meat of these dead cattle. The upper caste people would barge into the dalit moholla and snatch the vessel from the stove and run. Often while running with the vessel they would tumble and the meat pieces would spill on the ground. There would be a rampage among the people of the upper caste over these mud-coated pieces of meat. Nobody spared a thought to untouchability then!

We now move forward in time and stop when the country is fighting tooth and nail for its independence from foreign rule. The air is rent with slogans of *Inquilab Zindabad*—Long Live Freedom—and Quit

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[1] The famine of 1899, which lasted for 16 years in Gujarat and its neighbouring states.

India. There is much talk about how an independent India will form a democratic form of government where people will not be judged by caste and creed. Will this freedom bring for Harima—an old dalit woman—a different life when she goes out in summer to collect firewood than what is described in the following:

> It was hot summer afternoon and she was very thirsty. But where would she find water? The farmers would shoo her away the moment they saw her with the pile of wood on her head. If she entered their farm they would snatch away her wood, curse her and beat her up. Harima couldn't breathe and her throat was parched. Then she saw a cow urinating and she immediately cupped her palms and whatever she could hold in her palms she drank. That day Mother Cow had quenched her thirst!

If we had been optimistic about things changing and had imagined that Harima could erase her stamp of dalithood in an independent India and walk with her head held high, let us come closer to our times and read about a poignant query that a dalit additional collector in the 1990s, almost fifty years after independence, has to answer when his son comes home from an elite school and asks whether they are 'considered backward?' On probing, the father learns that a schoolboy had told his son that he was 'backward'. The father says, 'Each word of his reply took the form of a trident and pierced through my very existence, leaving it bleeding.' One wonders if the country has made any progress.

The experiences of the famine, of Harima and the little boy who is bewildered by his classmate's question are from B. Kesharshivam's autobiography, *Purnasatya (The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth)*. His voice is a subaltern one from Gujarat, narrating a history of a subaltern community that is starkly different from what is being portrayed and taught in the textbooks in school. This voice is part of a major literary movement in post-independent India. Known as the Dalit Literary movement, it had originated in the 1960s in Maharashtra as a part of the social movement for equality and justice,

and by the 1980s it had firmly established itself not only in the Marathi literary scene but also in other states and languages of the country, like Hindi, Tamil and Telegu, and its impact was felt at the national level through translation into English.

Over the years this literary movement has produced an enormous body of literature: poetry, fiction, autobiographies, treatises in almost all the major Indian languages and has firmly established its roots. It is now a strong force, a parallel stream, drawing as much attention of the readers as mainstream literature. What separates it from mainstream literature is its attempt to break the hegemony of the upper castes' claim to literary expression. Many scholars have observed that dalit literature is not satisfied by only 'an aesthetic performance in literature as an art'. As Guy Poitevin(nd) has explained, 'It serves purposes of social intervention and accordingly carries strong militant connotations.'

This is true of its poetry, short stories, novels and, more importantly, its autobiographies. What is very interesting is that even a cursory look at the body of dalit literary output reveals that after poetry and short stories, autobiography has been the favoured genre. This is not surprising when we take into account the fact that most marginalized voices have found it easier to express their anguish and pain by narrating their own life experiences. This genre has given them the scope of asserting their identity: in the case of the dalits, their 'dalit selfhood'. They have also used the autobiographical narratives 'as a form of political assertion' to create a powerful group by voicing a shared experience to fight against caste discrimination.

Many critics have found a close similarity between the autobiographies of dalits and that of women and blacks. They have observed that there is a distinct difference in the autobiographical expression of the marginalized voices from that of mainstream voices. Sarah Beth(nd) has observed that 'autobiographies of marginalized groups differ in that they are written by . . . individuals who emphasize the ordinariness of their life rather than their uniqueness in order to establish themselves as representative of their community'. Like the autobiographies of the other marginalized groups, in dalit

unmediated experience and have become repetitive and stereotypical' (A. P. Mukherjee 2003: xxix). In defence, most dalits have stressed the importance of authenticity of experience and have stressed the importance of capturing this reality in a way that would help understand the forces that shaped their lives and also inspire people to bring about a change in this social structure. As Kesharshivam says:

> And yet that untouchability like the epic curse had not ceased to pursue me. I was destined to lead a very contradictory life . . . I feel in one life I have lived many lives and that is why I have taken the liberty of writing this autobiography and narrating the stories of my many selves.

He calls untouchability the 'bleeding heart of the poor' which instead of being tended is constantly aggravated. The truth expressed is real because it is a shared truth of a community and moreover what he writes is not about his illustrious past but his ordinariness and anguish, and any attempt to expose one's painful past demands extreme courage and honesty.

Though many dalit autobiographies have a clear agenda of using the 'author's life experiences of pain as a means of political assertion' (Beth nd), Kesharshivam's stands slightly apart. He too exposes the hypocrisy of the upper castes and bares the naked truth of 'untouchability' but his narrative is not just a resistant voice. Neither is it militant in its approach. At one level it is a protest, a very strong protest, and at another level it narrates the pain and trials and tribulations of a poor boy making it big. Very often self-pity can be a serious pitfall for an autobiography especially when dealing with a painful past. But what makes *The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth* so distinct is the restraint of the author in delineating his past. The incidents are often described from a child's eyes, where the atrocity and discrimination in a dalit child's life find expression, but it comes discreetly. The dominant tone is that of playfulness of how innocently a child invents games to play with pieces of wood or

seeds or mud or pieces of bones and skull! The impact of using contrasting playthings has a powerful impact on the reader without the author directly pointing it out. His craving for thin dal or bhadada that his mother makes with slightly rotten mangoes goes a long way to leave an imprint on the reader.

Kesharshivam is a skilful narrator and he has used this skill successfully to bring us many home truths about our society. Some of the chapters describing his escapades as a child are memorable events described in the book. As a novelist and a short story writer Kesharshivam has given us some very interesting characters in his book. The characters of his parents come out very strongly in the book—mother, a true matriarch, and father, a misguided but lovable dreamer who remains a failure all his life. The minor character sketches of his sister and his first wife are delicately portrayed. In fact, though there is an undercurrent of anguish and pain at every stage, at least in the first part of the autobiography, there is also a ray of hope and an expectancy that drive young Bhikha to aim for something better in life. The social lives of the dalits have been meticulously recorded, no event is considered insignificant for narration. As a result we get to know about every aspect of their lives: births, weddings, religious festivals or local *bhavais* or mushayaras and we not only get a glimpse of dalit social lives but also understand the forces that shaped and nurtured young Bhikha's mind. The tone is not defiant; it is just the opposite: a fond memory lovingly recalled. But there is always a sting—or a shool to quote author's word—at the end which inflicts a deep wound in the hearts of the reader.

It is very clear that Dr. Ambedkar has been the dominant influence on Kesharshivam. He has acknowledged his debt to Ambedkar at every stage of his life. This comes out very strongly in the second part of the book where he sets out to record his career till his fifty-eighth year when he retired from his job of a civil servant in the state government. Each incident demonstrates how he succeeded in teaching the rural dalits Ambedkar's mantra: 'get educated, get organized and then revolutionize'. But each incident also brings out

how the forces in post-independent Indian society worked to shatter the dreams that young Bhikha had dreamt at the time of the country's independence. His desire of being freed of the shackles of bondage of 'untouchability' never completely materializes. Right from the time of birth the stamp of being an 'untouchable' haunts him. As a child he was not allowed to drink water from the *parab* or earthen jar: somebody had to pour water in his cupped hand, his leftover food would not be touched even by the beggars and however meritorious he was, he had to put up being known as the 'government's son-in-law' who enjoys special treatment. As a class one officer in the civil service he is denied house, promotion, and accused of bribery. Yet in his career life his achievements have been incredible. In a true sense he was able to carry out Ambedkar's call of making a difference in the lives of dalits wherever he was posted. He was able at least to empower members of these castes within his ambit of power. And this is no mean achievement in the bureaucratic set up of the country.

At many places *The Whole Truth* reminds us of Gandhi. Indeed, though Kesharshivam has not openly acknowledged his debt to Gandhi, his presence is felt in the way he approaches the facts of his life and especially the way he pens his thoughts. Gandhi called his autobiography 'an experiment with truth' whereas Kesharshivam calls his *Purnasatya: The Whole Truth*. Both are committed to tell the truth: honestly, sincerely and in a detached manner. One has to remember that Gandhi's autobiography is a watershed in Gujarati literature. Anybody writing an autobiography post-Gandhi is bound to get compared with his work. Kesharshivam also succeeds in bringing the Gandhian simplicity in his expression. In the introduction to his autobiography he has said: 'Gandhiji had urged people to use simple language—one that even a koshiyo can understand . . . I've tried to follow his advice and have attempted to write in such a way that even the marginalized girl in the society is able to understand my writing!' He uses short simple unadorned sentences to express truth. The following description from his childhood will prove the point:

> When I started going to the mill I started to play with pieces of coal and ash. A copper coin is put in the mouth of a dead man before he is cremated. I used to look for these coins in the ashes of burnt corpses on the cremation ground. At times I even had the misfortune, or should I say fortune, of playing with pieces of human skulls and fragments of bones.

Or the description of the death of little Ganga, the author's childhood friend under a collapsed wall:

> Once, a serious disaster occurred in the bone meal factory. A wall collapsed on one side. Little Ganga was playing there with pieces of bones and she was buried under it. Her mother's screams tore through our eardrums and pierced our hearts; her mother's tears were unstoppable . . . Ganga who used to be our everyday playmate had left for a different land. Her palms were covered with fine bone dust. She too would be soon reduced to bones. She had ended the game of death, but our game of crying had not ended.

At a third plane, *The Whole Truth* also critiques mainstream Gujarati literature. As an established writer Kesharshivam has brought in the question of acceptance of dalit writers by mainstream writers. It is interesting to note that in spite of nation-wide dalit literary movement, the dalit writers in Gujarat felt the need for establishing a separate literary organization, the Dalit Sahitya Sabha, as late as in 1994. Kesharshivam notes with pain in his introduction:

> Mulk Raj Anand had written *Untouchable* in Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Ashram in close association and under the guidance of Gandhiji. This novel was translated into fourteen languages of the world but it had not been translated in Gujarati till he requested Dr. Ranjana Harish to do it. Was *Untouchable* something untouchable for Gujarati language? In all my activities—reading, writing, and meeting writers I have encountered this truth.

His first encounter of the resistance was in 1959 when he wrote his first short story '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*'. His use of dalit dialect and dalit anger towards the upper castes created an uproar in the genteel society of Gujarat. Kesharshivam has noted in his autobiography that for six months the readers of the magazine *Chandni* discussed whether such a story written mostly in a dalit dialect should be published at all. To think that a story by a tenth standard boy should create such a storm in the literary circle says a great deal about freedom of expression in the state. At another place Kesharshivam has noted how the great Gujarati poet Nanalal had commented with scorn about the famous novelist Pannalal Patel's novel *Malela Jeev* when published in 1941:

> 'How can there be any literature of the *ghayjas*? Throw the book in the hot water stove.'

And Kesharshivam adds: 'If Pannalal's work had evoked such a comment, how could dalit literature find any place in literature?'

He then adds:

> Pannalal had no first hand experience of the dalit society. If he had been exposed to their plight he would have certainly written about it in *Manvi ni Bhavai*. Perhaps he was aware of it but the fear of the upper caste's wrath prevented him from penning it. Or was it the fear of Nanalal? Tremendous courage is needed to create dalit literature. The agony of bitter hunger experienced during famine pales before the pain that a dalit has to bear when the stamp of an untouchable is branded on every pore of his body.

And it is this unadorned, stark truth that surrounded him he has attempted to record in his autobiography. He has said in 'Signature of Existence': 'If you were to knock on the words of pain, you would hear the sound of truth . . . if you were to dig into them, you would find blood streaking out.'

This is also the reason why I have translated the title as *The Whole Truth* because what he narrates is truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The first time I came across *Purnasatya* was in 2002 when I was gathering material for the workshop on 'Autobiography in Gujarat' organized by The Katha Academic Centre, Ahmedabad. While trying to collect samples of autobiographical writing of people from different classes and creeds of Gujarat I came across the just published volume of Kesharshivam's *Purnasatya*. I felt its tremendous impact especially because I had just completed translating Gandhi's *Satya na Prayogo* (*My Experiments with Truth*) from Gujarati into Bengali. The comparison was obvious and I was struck by Kesharshivam's challenging title. The historic significance of the book was immense: as pointed out earlier, it is the first Gujarati dalit autobiography. Moreover, as a member of the translation centre I was aware of the urgency of making good regional language books available in English so that these reach out to a wider readership. This was especially important in the case of Gujarati where there is a dearth of English translation.

Finally, a note on the translation. It is impossible to convey the different registers so skilfully used by the author to convey distinctions of caste and class. Much of the charm of the book lies in the use of local dialect in the dialogue and by rendering it in standard English the subtleties are lost. I hope that by making such a work available to a larger public, I have compensated this loss to some extent. I would also feel happy if I have been able to move the readers by this small effort.

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Part I

Growing Up

1. Birth

At the time of my birth no miracle happened, nor had there been any prophecy. How could there be? I was about to be born with a curse of epic proportions. Perhaps some sage had pronounced a curse on me, 'Go, henceforth you shall be born a dalit.'

In the face of such condemnation, perhaps even God would have had to submit! It is often said of a person with an overly religious bent of mind who engages in yoga and meditation that perhaps he had had to be reborn because he had been a fallen soul who had failed in his penance in his previous life. Was it obligatory for my dalit soul to be born into this world in this fallen society? 'Untouchable' had been stamped on my forehead even before my birth, while I was still in the womb. My parents had two sons and a daughter before me so my birth was not a significant event in their lives. Had I been the only child I might have believed that I had been born because they had taken some religious vow, visited some sage or saint, or had received some blessing or grace from an enlightened soul, or had offered a coconut to the Goddess at Pavaghad! But no ritual of this kind preceded my birth. It was just a 'routine' affair.

I do not know whether my name had been registered after my birth, but I do recall the case of my friend, a Class I officer. He had once looked at the entry of his name in the panchayat office. He found that the entry said: '*Mafo Keso Dhhed* . . .'[1] We had a good laugh at this but underneath lay the pain of the past we had endured. Irrespective of whether my birth had been registered or not, I arrived on earth. I use the word 'earth' deliberately. According to the tradition

1. The term 'Dhhed' was originally a word of abuse used for all the untouchables. Now there is a law against using it.

of this country the whole earth is a family: *vasudhaiva kutumbkam*. If I say I was born in this country, would I not be accused of being narrow-minded? For centuries we have memorized such proverbs in a parrot-like manner when the reality is so very different!

Kalol is my birth place—the motherland that is supposed to be more beautiful than heaven. It was 1940: the drumbeats and blasts of World War II were heard all around the world. In this country there was an upsurge in the freedom movement. Along with the political battle that had been waged to gain freedom, Dr. Ambedkar was fighting another battle—one of social liberation. The torch of revolution was being lit in every nook and corner of the country. Around the same time, in France, Jean-Paul Sartre was defining the 'word' as a loaded gun. He wrote: 'A writer is like a gun loaded with words. His words are like the bullets fired from a gun.'

At this time I was in my mother's womb. On 28 September 1940 in a house with a tiled roof and a mud-baked floor, I let out a little wail for the first time and opened my eyes. It must have been my first word, perhaps. I am not sure whether there had been any firing of a gun at that time! Perhaps not, because I was not a writer then, but I know for sure two shackles of bondage were kept ready for me. Politically, the country was under subjugation, but I was subjugated by society too! The political slaves were fortunate because they were not denied the sense of touch. But in my case, nobody would even dare touch me! My condition was worse than that of an ordinary slave. Right from the time I was in the womb it had been decided that I was going to be born with a curse of epic proportions! That is why the late poet Sundaram in spite of his Gandhian beliefs and adherence to Aurobindo's philosophy wrote: If only as a man I could acquire the true qualities of a human being.

The accuracy of the date of my birth is questionable. My mother told me, 'You were born a month after Khengar's birth.' According to Ma's version, Khengar was older than me by a month, but according to his birth registration, he is younger. Who is older and who is younger? Can a registered entry decide that?

The year of my birth—1940—was a momentous time in our freedom movement. The drumbeats of World War II could be

heard all around. Along with the freedom struggle was also heard Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's clarion call which shook many Duryodhans in this country.[2] It is said that Abhimanyu while he was still in his mother's womb had overheard his maternal uncle talk about the six battle formations. At the time of his birth he had known how to enter these six formations but he had failed to break the seventh one, and he paid with his life. I too had heard, while in my mother's womb, about the intense desire for freedom and tales of struggle to achieve this freedom. But after birth: the shackles of social subjugation were ready for me. It was not in my hands whether to be born or not; so I was born in a subjugated India, in the servant community of a slave society. I now know how to break the seventh circle of untouchability. But I have not yet succeeded in breaking this rotten formation. My grandfather, great grandfather and his father sizzled and died in the fire of this curse. Their steely bones must have by now disintegrated in the earth of this land. I wonder how many generations before me had been pushed down the steep slopes into the valley of death as they waited listening to the song 'there will be a new dawn', putting their faith in the words like 'a day will break, however, dark and dense the night be'. My great grandfather's father, my great grandfather, my grandfather and grandmother died waiting for this new dawn. Thereafter, my father and mother waited in vain. Now it is my turn. Only at the fag end of my life, I can see a faint light amidst darkness, but it is not the real dawn. That has yet to come. I eagerly await its arrival, but I am not sure whether I will be able to see it. How many more generations will we have to wait?

The process of procreation continues. Some are born in barns, some in railway carriages, on roads or on banks of lakes, and now many are born while in *hijrat*, while fleeing from their homeland. Some are even born in prison. In this country the prison carries a special significance. Lord Krishna himself was born in a prison. The best literature of the freedom movement has also been written in prison: freedom fighters in prison utilized their time fruitfully to create

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2. B. R. Ambedkar urged the Dalits to stand up for their rights, to leave the village, where it would be hard to break away from the social constraints that were imposed on them, for the city, and to convert to Buddhism, which preached equality.

excellent works. The dalits, however, have to rot for life in a prison without bars! What imprisonment would we call it? Of untouchables? Of speech? Of knowledge? Dalit literature is also a product of these various imprisonments! Dalit literature means prison literature!

Birth means entry into life. But for the dalits it is an entry into a forest. When a dalit is born he finds himself surrounded by a forest. Among dalits many men are named Jeevan (life): 'van' is *varna*. The name should really be Jeevarna, but because it is difficult to pronounce, it must have become Jeevan! 'Varna' is associated with *vaina* (the four main categories of the caste system; the word itself means 'colour'). I have often been asked, '*Alya*! Which "vaina" do you belong to?'

These forests are full of wild animals which kill at a blow. They often eat what they kill so that there is no bother of burial. Although there are wild animals all around, they do not always kill at a stroke. Snakes carry their venom only in their mouths; there are other animals that have poison in every pore of their bodies. Despite being so poisonous they take time to kill.They torture their victims, digging and clawing at them with the nails of untouchability. All this happens so slowly that the habit of endurance develops among the sufferers, and there is a feeling of helplessness. Had they pounced suddenly, somebody might have revolted, but it was all done slowly and systematically, like a rat ferreting out its prey.

The forests are not uniform. There are several sanctuaries where these wild animals are sheltered: social sanctuaries, religious sanctuaries and spiritual sanctuaries. In the social sanctuary they scratch their victims with their sharp claws and say: 'Move aside, you are an untouchable; your shadow mustn't fall on us.'

'You think you matter, do you?'

In the religious sanctuary they pour lead into their victims' ears. In the spiritual sanctuary whatever the spiritual knowledge of the sufferer, he has to die the death of a Shambuk.[3] This has gone on not for years, but for centuries. All these forests are being felled now, and as a result the number of these wild beasts is

3. Shambuk was a shudra who was killed by Lord Rama for the audacity of offering penance—a privilege meant only for the high castes—to God.

dwindling. Tired of the social sanctuary, the untouchables entered the religious sanctuary. The situation there was no different. Even religions which did not have any concept of untouchability started adopting this practice as a result of close association with the dominant culture. In Baroda, a Parsi had forced Dr. Ambedkar to vacate forthwith the lodging he had taken. The Muslims also started practising untouchability. In the religious and spiritual sanctuaries this farce continues even after death. Cremation grounds were always segregated, but the graveyards of dalits who have converted to Christianity are also segregated!

In the holy land where the sacred Ganga flows, I was born in the village of Kalol, in the district of Mehsana. My ancestors had settled in Kalol after the hijrat. So I did not have to go on hijrat myself. Our original village was supposed to be Adewad, hence many in our family took the surname Adewadia, but before that who knows how many times we have had to leave our native land? My search for my original native place continues in spite of the fact that I have to hear constantly comments such as, 'The law is now in your favour . . . You are now the government's son-in-law.' How many young dalit women even today, trying to escape death in the darkness of the night, fall prey to rape and become *janeta* (mother), but poor souls they fail to acquire the simple status of an ordinary *janta* (a citizen).

It was only after I became a father that I understood the pains of motherhood and the joys of birth. When my wife Bharti was pregnant, I took her to the best doctor in town. I recall once during her pregnancy, when she started bleeding slightly, how I rushed her from Gandhinagar to Dr. Anklesaria's clinic near Electricity House in Ahmedabad. This was in 1981. After examining her, the doctor had advised termination of pregnancy and that she be admitted to hospital that very moment. I was then working at the Raj Bhavan, and the physician attached to the Raj Bhavan had accompanied me. He told Dr. Anklesaria, 'Allow us to take her back to Gandhinagar. There is a bathroom attached to her bedroom. We will ensure that she does not move around much. Please prescribe some medicine. We will follow the treatment you suggest. Every fifteen days we will bring her to you for a check up.'

We brought Bharti to Gandhinagar. The Raj Bhavan physician examined her twice a day. I also took leave from work and stayed at home to look after her. We took great care of her because she was going to be a mother! I often wonder had anyone taken such care of my mother when I was in my mother's womb? For nine months, till my birth, she must have had one foot in the house and the other in the place where she slogged! Even during the last days of her pregnancy she must have looked after the house and at the same time done hard labour to fill our bellies! Thus I was born from the womb of a mother who had never been cared for. Bharti had told me before her delivery, 'As soon as the baby is born trace *Om* on his tongue with a gold stick dipped in a mixture of honey and ghee.'

At the time of my son's birth this mixture was kept ready. Our neighbour Anupreetaben had been with us throughout the delivery. She wrote Om on my son's tongue with a gold stick. After that his horoscope was prepared. During winter, the heater would be switched on after his bath so that he would not catch cold. Once my mother-in-law commented, 'During our time we had nothing of this kind. After a child was born it would grow up on its own, tumbling and falling.'

My mother-in-law's words described my condition aptly. What a difference there was between my birth and my son's! I had studied under conditions of great hardship only because of the great inspiring influence of Dr. Ambedkar. At the end of my youth, at the fag end of life, I have become a Class I Government Officer. My son studies in an English-medium school. I try to ensure that he does not suffer from any feeling of inferiority and never finds himself defenceless. I have constantly endeavoured to teach him the lessons of self-respect and dignity. He did not know his own caste for some time. I changed his surname in school so that nobody would know his caste. One day on returning from school he asked me:

'Papa, are we considered *backward*?'

I looked at him for some time. Then I asked him, 'Beta, why do you ask?'

'One of the boys in school told me that I was *backward*.'

Each word of his reply took the form of a trident and pierced through my very existence, leaving it bleeding.

2. Toys

Children love toys and their parents strive to give them whatever they can afford. In the case of the firstborn, their enthusiasm knows no bounds. For children whose parents cannot afford to provide toys, any object around them becomes a plaything. Children born near a riverbank wade in water or those who live by the seashore collect shells. In our case, there were only dust and earth around us, so we built earthen houses or collected different plants, stumps or seeds and used them as toys.

We had a wooden doll in our house. My mother had, perhaps, bought it from a carpenter for my brother, her firstborn, or somebody had given it to her. After him, my elder sister played with it. My second brother, who died young, must also have played with it for sometime. Then it was my turn. It was a wooden toy so there was no question of it breaking, but by the time I got it, it was slightly worn out. When I look for it now in my old house in Kalol I cannot find it. But then my play with the past is over. I have become a plaything in the hands of time.

We had to find our toys around the place where our parents worked for their livelihood. In the bonemeal factory we played with cattle's hooves, bones and horns. In the fields we played with ears of bajra, or if there was a puddle of water, we splashed in it. Our Holi was never played with red and yellow colours. We used mud from the open drain of the moholla or black soot from the burnt earthen vessel and sometimes even cow dung. On dhuleti day (the second day of Holi when people play with colours) a mob from the moholla would go around from house to house, pulling out those who tried to hide. They would then lift them and douse them with the dirty water of the open drain. It was impossible to recognize anyone's face. I doubled up with laughter watching these

faces, but many small children were often frightened. I remember, at times I was scared when some young men with blackened faces stuck out their tongues, pushed their noses up with their thumbs and tried to be Mahakali.

There was happiness all around, and we celebrated the festival of colour though we had no water pistols to spray colours, or any trough of coloured water to douse people. I moved around in just a kurta, running with everyone from one end of the moholla to the other. I did not even feel hungry that day and Ma had to drag me home. She would make me sit next to her and force me to eat. After my meal I would run back to join the festivities. However, my everyday Holi used to be a face stained with sticky mucous from a running nose that I had wiped with the back of my palm which left a thin line of moustache. But on that day Ma would run after me with a cane in her hand saying, 'Can't you ever rest in the house?' Suddenly one of her sisters-in-law of the moholla would colour her face with soot, and I would burst out laughing. Watching me laugh she would splash me with colour. All the daughters and sisters-in-law of the moholla played Holi with great enthusiasm and there was no restraint even between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. However, if anyone showed any reluctance, a little gulal was applied on him with the comment, 'Come, today you can't refuse to play Holi. This festival comes only once a year.'

Many would be angry on finding their clothes dirty. We children used to fill water in small bottles and pour it on each other. Seeing me with a bottle someone would even comment, 'Alya, where did you find this bottle of liquor? Is it your father's?'

My father drank, so people often taunted me. If my mother happened to hear this she would retort angrily: 'If he drinks, he drinks on his own money. He doesn't borrow from you, does he?'

Because she said this during the festival, the person would smile and walk away. I often collected money from the elders for Holi and along with other children bought dates and divided them amongst ourselves. Fifteen days before Holi, I made rattles with cow dung to be used as offering in the holy fire. I took empty matchboxes, filled them up with tiny pebbles, covered

them with cow dung, and then put them out on the roof to dry. Once they were dry they worked as rattles. I made Holaiyas in different shapes: round, square, rectangular. I even made long tongues out of cow dung. I would make a hole in all these Holaiyas. Once they were dry I would string them into a garland with a cord. At the time of lighting the Holi fire I would be ready with all these, and throw them into the separate dalit Holi that was lighted. Today, when I look back I wonder. What have I not offered in life's Holi so far? My dignity . . . my prestige . . . my self-respect, all have blazed away in this fire.

The day before Janmasthami we took silt from the lake. An idol of Krishna would be made from it for the moholla. I too brought home some silt and made a separate idol of Krishna for myself. At times I even made objects like sparrows, grinding mills or human figures. I would show what I had crafted to others in the moholla and at home. My mother often lovingly watched my workmanship.

On the night of Kali Chaudash, a garbo—an earthen pot with holes in its side and a lamp inside—was made in the moholla. People danced around the garbo and sang devotional songs praising Mataji, the Mother Goddess. I would stay awake till five in the morning with the elders. Once the garbo was ready I decorated it with flowers and arranged earthen lamps inside it. We got wood from the field, shaping it to make sticks for the dance. My Lakhmankaka knew carpentry; he had all the necessary tools. I often played with these tools and used the plane to shape the stick.

The Turis would make their entrance crying *Khamma mara Jadavda, khamma mara Vaghela* (God bless my Jadavas and God bless my Vaghelas) and perform bhavai. Inspired by the king's sword in the bhavai, I also made a sword of a stalk of drumstick. We would then put a cot upright and make a curtain by covering it with a torn dhoti of Pitaji's or a torn sari of Ma's. Then we children played the game of bhavai. We would dress up like kings, hanging a piece of cloth or a short dhoti around our shoulders.

When I write today, I recall a passage from Jean Paul Sartre's autobiography, *Words*. He describes his house on the sixth floor

from where he could see the rooftops of the other houses around. He then talks of his childhood and says, 'I never played in the mud, or collected any plants or leaves, or looked for any bird's nest, or aimed a stone at any bird.'

How different can childhoods be! I had a very playful childhood. At that time I did not feel anything was amiss. We used to play gilli danda or tip-cat, kabaddi, khokho, and agarpat (somewhat like kabbadi; here the person is prevented from entering the opponent's square) When I started going to the mill I played with pieces of coal and ash. A copper coin is put in the mouth of a dead man before he is cremated. I looked for these coins in the ashes of burnt corpses on the cremation ground. At times I even had the misfortune, or should I say fortune, of playing with pieces of human skulls and fragments of bones. I remember while I searched for copper coins in the ashes, dogs came chasing with pieces of bones from half-burnt bodies and I would shoo them off.

When Ma went to the fields for sowing, weeding or harvesting I played with stalks of bajra or jowar. I ate the green kernel from the ears of wheat. Sometimes when the sharp edge of the grass scratched against my fingers, a streak of blood would appear. Helping Ma in her work also used to be some kind of a play for me. A women tied a piece of cloth to a branch of a tree and made a cradle to rock a child and I could tickle his belly and make him laugh. If he wet his clothes I called his mother so that he would not catch a cold.

Ma would bring home a basket full of pods of cotton from the spinning mill. We peeled these pods and played with the seeds. The pods generally had three sections but sometimes while peeling them we came across ones with four, five and at times even six sections. There would be a competition as to who could collect most pods of these kinds. Ma would sprinkle water on these hard pods so that we could peel them easily.

We also accompanied Ma to the fields to collect wood, where I ate the mahuda flowers and collected their shiny seeds. From these seeds was extracted an oil which was called doliya. I used to collect shiny seeds of all kinds. However, Ma never let me touch the seeds of datura because they were poisonous. I also

collected the seeds of chanothi, neem and tamarind. I ate the ripe fruit of the neem and tamarind and brought home the yellow flowers of aval and white flowers of caltrops to play with the other kids. I bathed bare bodied in the open in the first rains of the monsoon. I would place the red beetles, which came out in this season on my palm and make them crawl on my fingers. I caught the tiny tadpoles and dropped them in puddles, or pulled out the green and yellow grasshoppers from the thorny hedges and placed them on the ground and made them fly away. They would fly back to the hedge. At times when green coloured insects pissed on my hand there was a burning sensation and I would get blisters on my hands. I played with the little mice, dangling them by their tails. But what I enjoyed most was carrying the little puppies around. Cowrie shells, games of dice, marbles and tops were our indoor games.

Once during some construction work in the mill we were playing with sand. We had covered our feet with moist sand and were making houses in the sand. My cousin Jadi looked at my house with keen interest. I asked her:

'Do you want to live in this house?'

My Kaki overheard this question and rushed in to say: 'Why should my daughter live in it *now*? We will all have to go there after death.'

These words affected me deeply. They remained with me and when I was in college I wrote a story, *Reti no Mehel* (The Sandcastle), based on this incident and sent it to *Navchetan*. The late Chanpsibhai Udeshi liked it so much that he published it in *Navchetan*'s special issue on short stories. In his note on the story he wrote: '*Reti no Mehel* is a very short, simple but unforgettable story, which succeeds in hitting hard with just one sentence.'

Today these toys and games are no longer physical objects for me. They have become an inseparable part of my life. My life turned into a game.. But then, man is nothing but a toy in the hands of the Almighty. We go through life enacting different roles with different people. Then one day when the play is over we have to quit irrespective of whether we are dalits or non-dalits. Sometimes some of us have to quit in the middle of the game like the little girl Ganga from my moholla.

Many from my moholla used to work in the bonemeal factory. Some of them loaded wagons with bones in the railway yard. They

worked with just bones. They emptied the trucks laden with bones, filled wicker baskets, and carried these on their heads. Their hands and feet would be covered with fine bone dust. They had to work in nauseating stench but they got used to it. Their eyes got used to the sight of maggots in the horns. Nothing seemed repulsive to them. In their effort to eke out a living they became used to the muck all around. It was hell out there. The children also accompanied their parents to this place. Once a disaster took place in the bone mill. A wall collapsed on one side. Little Ganga was playing there with pieces of bones and she was buried under it. Her mother's screams tore through our eardrums and pierced our hearts; her mother's tears were unstoppable. Ganga's older sister Kashi wailed loudly. Cries of Ganga . . . Ganga . . . echoed all around. She was later pulled out after clearing the rubble. She had lost her life under this wall. Her body was brought to the moholla. Ganga who used to be our everyday playmate had left for a different land. Her palms were covered with fine bone dust. She too would be soon reduced to bones. She had ended the game of death, but our game of weeping had not ended.

3.Ma

Mother Jasoda's love for Krishna is legendary. How indulgent she was when he was a child is a story known to every household. My mother's love for me was no less. My bare bodied childhood was continuously bathed with her love. Ma's affection has kept every day of my life fresh and alive.

Children addressed their mothers in different ways. Some called them Vahu, a word used especially among the dalits to address their daughters-in-law. My cousin used to call his mother Vahu, whereas my nephew called his mother 'my Shanta'. Some even

referred to their mother as Boon (sister). My elder brother and elder sister called her Madi. As a child I called my mother Madi but when I went to school I started calling her Ma.

When Ma went to buy vegetables she would buy the cheapest mangoes or ones that had been discarded. We called the discarded mangoes *bhadada*. She would first wash these mangoes and remove the rotten portions, and then give them to us to eat. My brothers and sisters and I would suck the mango seeds. The older boys would often ask me a riddle: 'What does it mean to kiss Ambalal's daughter?' While I scratched my head the boy would quip: 'Don't you know this much? It is a mango . . .'

I would burst out laughing. The mango tree is called Ambo in Gujarati and so Ambalal's daughter is a mango and the action of sucking it is kissing. We enjoyed eating the kernels of the mango seeds, which we took out after roasting the seeds. Sometimes I filed these seeds against a stone to make a whistle. Ma often begged for pieces of watermelon or for some cucumber, jamun, rayan (yellow berry) or kokadi (dry rayan) when she went to get vegetables.

Ma cooked tandalja and dodi very well. When she went to the fields to work or to collect firewood she would collect tandalja leaves from the ground and pluck dodi greens from the hedges. She also collected the fruits of the dodi, which she gave us to eat. She cooked the greens with soaked moong dal in an earthen kaddo or duni. She would use a chatvo—a wooden spatula—to stir the vegetable. 'Chatvo' also means to lick. So whenever we wanted to tease the shopkeeper's son we would ask him: 'Do you have a chatvo in your shop?'

He knew what we meant and would answer back: 'Go and ask your father to lick.'

Jhutakaka's shop was in Chaganlal's courtyard. We loved teasing him. He used to put up with us but at times he would chase us away and then we had to beat a hasty retreat home. If we were caught, we had to submit to being slapped. Even today I can recall the taste of the vegetable cooked by Ma in the kadda, an earthen karhai. I loved Ma's rotis even though they were dry. I cannot explain why they tasted so good. Our daily meal used to be either karhi and rotlo or vegetables and rotlo or dal and rotlo. However, at times we had only chilli or onion and rotlo but we did not mind. Ma ate the

leftovers after we had finished eating. I remember Ma scraping the vessel for a little vegetable, or eating a rotlo with water. Some evenings she cooked rice and dal. On the day she had to make an offering of rice to the deity she would invariably cook rice and dal. The rice for the offering was served with ghee and jaggery. The day she made this she took care to see that I did not eat the rice before it was offered to the Goddess. She would say, 'Look, don't pollute the rice by eating it. It has to be offered to Mataji.'

The day dal and rice were cooked I would be overjoyed. Ma tempered the dal with a pinch of asafoetida and added kokam—a dried sour fruit—and jaggery. The thin dal was so delicious that its taste lingered in my mouth till the next time it was cooked. The evenings when dal and rice were made, nothing else was cooked. My father did not eat rice so Ma would cook rotlo especially for him. The grain used to cook rice and khichri was the coarse oily kind. When there was no rice in the house she took some bajra and pounded it, adding a little water. I watched the rhythmic movement of the wooden pestle as Ma pounded the grain and added the required amount of water. She cooked this pounded bajra with whole moong and made bhaidku—a kind of kichri. We enjoyed eating bhaidku with oil. The next morning I would add buttermilk to it to make porridge and ate it or drank it up straight from the vessel. Sometimes Ma brought cheno (a kind of grain) and pounded it in the mortar, and made ghensh, a thin gruel. This used to last for two days. It acquired a unique taste when it was mixed with buttermilk. And if milk was added to it, it tasted really delicious. But when was there any milk or ghee in our house? I do not remember ever drinking milk as a child. The ghensh gave us the enjoyment of a rich sweetmeat or the satisfaction of a good meal. The morning tea was made with a quarter seer (about 100ml) of milk and jaggery. If Ma managed to get some sugar from the ration shop then she would mix it with jaggery and make tea. Every morning I bought two paise worth of tea leaves, and because it was bought every day we drank fresh tea. Ma tried to save some tea leaves from this packet. I often drank two cups of this tea in the morning with the previous night's rotlo. At times she would rebuke me affectionately, 'Foolish boy, children shouldn't drink so much tea.' But how could it be called tea? We used to call it

lambapani in jest. During winter or in the monsoon Ma would put a little dry ginger in it, and if she had some mint leaves from the vegetable vendor she would put them in the tea as well.

Ma worried not only for us but also for the children of the owner of the farm where she worked. The people who poured buttermilk into her vessel from a height to avoid touching her came to her when their children had bronchitis or whooping cough. She would give them a very small dose of *gormat*–smaller than even a tiny mustard seed–to cure them. Gormat was extracted from a dead cow's stomach. When a high caste woman brought her sick baby she would draw water from the pit where dead cattle were soaked in the tannery and apply this filthy and stinking water on the baby's limbs and tongue.

Ma made quilts from rags, which I spread on a coir charpoy and slept. Often on winter nights, a stray dog would come and sleep next to me. I would chase it away if I woke up in the night, and if Ma came to cover me and found the dog lying with me she would shoo it away saying: 'Look at this creature; it also needs a cot to sleep!' She would at times curse the dog: 'Shoo! How long has this brother's deor been sitting here?' And then she would turn to me and say: 'Why don't you beat up this dog? You will get ticks from him.'

I used to wet my bed. It had become a habit with me. In the morning the thin quilt would be completely soaked, and in the monsoon it would stink, but at that time that smell did not bother me; perhaps I had become used to it. Once on the occasion of a community gathering, my father and I visited my in-laws in Randheja village. At night I wet the bed but before anyone found out about it I turned the quilt over. Ma used to call me a 'bed-wetter'. She often carried my quilt to the pond to wash it. I even got a good spanking for bed-wetting. When she spanked me her bracelet would hurt and she would caress me and say: 'Beta, you are a big boy now. What if someone came to know about this?'

Then she would laugh and comment: 'If some malicious person were to convey this to your in-laws they would break your engagement.' I had been betrothed when I was very small. My kaka–father's brother–was married off when he was just a child. Ma often narrated how my grandmother had carried him while

going around the marriage mandap. My in-laws used to send dates and kokadi for their little son-in-law. Ma would say: 'Here take this; your father-in-law has sent it.'

I was very fond of kokadis. When I ate them Ma would say: 'Look at him, absolutely shameless!'

Whenever my father-in-law visited us my father would get liquor for him. Ma would roast valura—dry thin pieces of meat—for him as the guests enjoyed these with their drinks.

Hunger and sleep were my close companions. I could sleep peacefully on the bare cow-dung plastered floor. At times I would snatch a good nap on a pile of earth or sand when I accompanied Ma to the farm. I was often asked to look after a baby while its mother worked at the farm. I rocked the makeshift hammock tied to a tree and if I could not stop its cries I would fetch its mother. She would then pull up her blouse and feed it. She would use her sari pallu to cover the child to avoid drawing the attention of others.

We were not very bothered or aware about cleanliness or hygiene.Our nails were often long and dirty and snot would trickle down the nose. When I came back from play, however, shabby or dirty I was Ma would immediately pull me onto her lap. If my face was snotty or dirty she would wash my face and wipe it with her sari. She always pestered me to have a bath. When she succeeded in getting hold of me she made me sit on the lehni, a flat stone, near the chenthia, a drain, a place where leftover food was thrown, and bathed me. She would rub hard to remove the dirt and I would whine because it hurt a lot. But she would not let me off. We did not have any fragrant soap in the house. Generally Ma bathed me without any soap. If I was very dirty or my skin was sticky then she scrubbed me with washing soap. As a result I often had rashes.While bathing me Ma would coax me, kiss me, but given a chance I would run away to the moholla. At times, right from the morning, I went away to play. She would get angry and not allow me inside the house. At last when I was very hungry and my stomach rumbled I would come back home. I would find Ma waiting with a cane in her hand and from a distance she would say: 'Go back to where you went to play. They will give you food.' But looking at my eyes she would feel sorry for me. She would pretend that she was talking with the other women from the

mohalla. When I saw that she was busy talking I would sneak into the house through the back window of the house. I would then pick up the pan of karhi and the tray of rotlas and get out the same way. I would sit outside and eat. When she saw me eat in the presence of others she would be afraid of the evil eye and rebuke me in a low tone: 'Now don't do this again. Go inside and eat.'

I would go inside with the pan and the wicker tray. She worried continuously about somebody casting an evil eye on me!

Once after a drinking bout, my father lost control over himself and started to beat Ma up. I watched and listened to her screams helplessly. Her loud wails made me cry. I came out weeping into the courtyard. I found that my kaki who lived in the third house from ours, had also rushed towards our house on hearing my mother's screams. But suddenly the kaki, who lived in the middle house, came out and caught hold of her and took her away. I was stunned. Nobody came to Ma's rescue. She went on groaning and receiving the blows. At night I saw Ma applying a paste of turmeric and salt to her body. Her agony of that day is still etched in my heart. Whenever I see anyone applying turmeric and salt paste to any wound, I feel a twinge in my heart and tears well up in my eyes.

4. Paternal Love

When my father returned from the mill, I would rush back home from the moholla. Ma often commented: 'This one hasn't bothered to come home since morning, but as soon as he saw you, he has turned up.' Pitaji would smile a little and then say: 'He is just a child.'

I would go up to him and open his mouth. He would take out the chewed paan from his mouth and give it to me, and this I

relished. Pitaji was not addicted to paan but whenever he drank he had it so that his breath would not smell. My father had a small business of cleaning boilers and doing sundry masonry work on contract in the mill. He was known in the town, mill, and the moholla as 'Shivo Contrati'. At one time he had a good income but he was unable to plan and organize his money. He was addicted to alcohol and beedi. He was also a very large hearted person. He spent a great deal on his friends and the money he lent never came back. Very often he would treat his friends to drinks and most of his income was spent on buying drinks and mutton curry for his friends at Bachubhai's liquor den near the mill. Even the Punjabi guard at the cinema hall had borrowed money from him. His good income helped him befriend many people, including the Sikhs and even a Pathan who once took me to a movie. I remember the Sikh guard at the mill. He was a tall, hefty man and always carried a sword. As a child I was scared of his beard and moustache and his long flowing hair, which he often wore loose. Nobody in the moholla or in the town ever had a fight with my father who was quiet and friendly by nature, and so he did not have any altercation with him while collecting dues. But after a bout of drink my father would be totally drunk and then in a regal mood he would boast of his various achievements. Ma and Dadi were captive listeners and if Ma were slightly inattentive he would even beat her up.

My father had three brothers and since he was the eldest he had been brought up with a lot of care and affection. He had studied up to the third standard. None of his other brothers took to drinking; only one brother smoked. My kaka, Dudhabhai, and my mama, Babubhai Kunthar, were inspired by His Highness Sayajirao Gaekwad to pursue higher studies in Vadodara and they both graduated in 1947-48. On that occasion dalits from the two hundred and eighty-two parganas honoured Dudhabhai. He went on to take up a job at the penicillin factory at Pimpri near Pune. He wanted dalits to gain economic independence so that they could free themselves from the financial exploitation of the moneylenders. In 1947-48 he founded the Kalyan Cooperative Bank in Kalol. This was the only bank for the scheduled castes at that time in the country. Whenever he came to Kalol to attend bank meetings, the youths of the moholla went to the station to

receive him. This was their way of showing respect to him. My second kaka had been offered a teaching job but he had declined it for fear of untouchability, which was widespread and like a poisonous cobra held society in its fatal grip. He preferred to work as a labourer at the weighing department in the mill. My third kaka, Savjibhai, had a small business of contract jobs like my father. He led a simple and frugal life, and so he was able to build two houses of brick and mortar of two and three storeys each. Once when Dr. Ambedkar proposed to visit Kalol, Kaka's three-storied house was chosen for his stay. It also housed the office of the Scheduled Caste Federation on the third floor where different activities related to social awakening took place. Babubhai laid the foundation stone of a dalit hostel in Patan. Most people considered our family progressive. However, except for my eldest brother who occasionally drank and smoked, the rest of us, my younger brother Kanti and I, never touched liquor or beedi. This surprised many people in the moholla. My father subscribed to the Gujarati daily *Sandesh*. He would read out portions of national and international news to Ma and Dadi every day. Many students from the neighbourhood came to borrow the newspaper. In the entire moholla ours was the only household that got a newspaper and this surprised many people. While a few believed that we got the newspaper to look up 'numbers' many were very curious to know the real reason. But my father never gambled or played the numbers game.

In spite of my father's good income he neither managed to build a proper house for us nor did he buy any jewellery for Ma. Whatever he earned, he squandered on liquor. So Ma and Motabhai, my eldest brother, had to work in the mill. Our house used to run on Ma's income. After Motabhai got married there were quarrels in the house, so he set up a separate house with Bhabhi. By that time Ma had lost her job in the yarn section. With the change in management, father lost his contract business in the mill. Earlier he had helped many people get jobs in the mill. There were four mills in Kalol and many dalits were migrating to towns and cities to escape untouchability in villages. Those who could not procure any jobs in the mill worked for Pitaji. But now he had to work with people who had worked under him as labourers earlier. It upset him but there was no escape.

Pitaji was a very hard working person. He woke up at five in the morning reciting Lord Rama's name, referring to Him as the Saviour of the helpless. He would advise me to wake up reciting Rama's name. Then he would light his beedi and at five-thirty would go to the fields with his latrine can. Once I was old enough to go by myself, I too carried my latrine can and went out in the morning. Sometimes while I was wandering in the fields I would hear the five-thirty whistle of the mills. These whistle sounds were so familiar that I could even tell which mill's whistle was blowing. Everybody in the moholla set their time by these whistles. On winter nights, after an early meal, when the whistle was heard somebody would even comment: 'Is it only eight-thirty? It seems quite late in the night.'

Pitaji sometimes quoted the following lines: 'A lone person can overcome a thousand odds with hard work'.

This must have been a line of a poem he had learnt as a child but it had a deep effect on my life. He also believed: 'Man should have many skills so that he never has to die of hunger.'

All his life he had to use his various skills to eke out a living. He had a vice or should I call it a virtue? It was over-confidence. He had a large heart and so he trusted people easily. He first started a pickles factory by borrowing money on interest. Initially it ran well but others' jealousy and his trusting nature brought about his ruin. His own manager betrayed him by conniving with others and the factory incurred a loss. He was in debt, and moreover, he had not given up his habit of drinking. Then he once again borrowed money on interest and opened a large tea and food stall in Kalol in the market place in front of Vishnu Theatre. I used to sit with him at the counter. No caste people ever came to this stall for the fear of being polluted. If someone unknowingly entered, the moment he realized his error, he would leave at once mouthing curses. Our only customers were the dalits, but they drank tea and bought beedis on credit. The dues mounted as nobody paid his share. There were fights when Motabhai went to collect the money. Finally the stall had to be closed down. Then Pitaji installed a weaving loom in the house. A large pit was dug out in the middle of the room to instal it. But he could not master the skill of weaving and finally he had to sell the loom.

Those were very difficult days. He was ultimately left with no option but to start working as a labourer in the boiler section of the mill. There was a huge debt to clear and his entire pay went into repaying it. On payday, the creditors stood at the gate of the mill and Pitaji could not leave the mill till late at night.The creditors standing outside would send in messages with other labourers when they found he was delayed. But how could he come out? When they saw me some of the creditors would surround me and say: 'Alya, what's your Bapa doing inside? Go call him.'

Once after paying the creditors, only eight annas were left of his pay and there were five people to feed in the house. He worried constantly about how he would see the month out. Somehow he managed by borrowing from different people. Sometimes we bought grain by selling household utensils. I would hide and carry the utensils in a bag to the coppersmith so that nobody in the moholla would know and the honour of the house was not tarnished. Ma or Pitaji did not dare sell the utensils openly out of shame and in fear of losing their honour. By then I was in the fifth standard and at times when I found that there was no possibility of getting money from anywhere I would borrow four or five rupees from my teachers, and with that we bought grain. Once we had only boiled stalks of wheat and water for dinner.

Then I started to work with Pitaji in the boiler section. I had to go inside the boiler and scrub its interior surface with an iron brush to remove salt deposits. From morning to night I used a hammer to break large blocks of coal into small pieces, which were needed to light the boiler. I developed blisters on my hands from constantly using the hammer, which often burst, but work had to go on. My palms hardened and even today I can feel the hardness. It is a constant reminder of not a nightmarish past but of its reality. I also carried the ash from the boiler in a wicker basket on my head. This I would dump on the heap outside. My entire body and hair would be covered with the ash that fell from the wicker basket and it was difficult for anyone to recognize me. I did not have to smear myself with ash like ascetics do; it covered my body without my effort. I used to learn English spellings and Sanskrit words and verses while carrying these baskets of ash and coal. The mills had narrow rail tracks for carts. When the coal

was brought by rail wagons it was dumped inside the back gate of the mill. From there the coal was loaded onto the carts, and these carts were then pushed along the rails and carried in. Generally, it took four to five people to push these carts but Pitaji, Ma and I together managed to do this work without anybody's help. It pained my parents deeply to see me do this back breaking labour but they were helpless. I recall how once when I had put my foot on the rail, a snake that was lying underneath slithered past and I just about managed to save myself from being bitten by it. Many children from the moholla did odd jobs or worked as helpers in masonry work, but nobody wanted to load coal and ash from the boiler. Once I went to call a friend to work with me in the mill. His parents were working in the weighing section, and when I mentioned the work in the boiler section his mother retorted in anger: 'We're still living. I won't let my child do such hard labour.'

During the afternoon break I went to the mill's canteen with a tin can to fetch tea for my father. There was strict segregation in the canteen. The dalits and higher caste people had separate sections for tea and water. There were satyagrahas against the practice of untouchability at Navjeeevan Mill in Kalol and many dalits had been beaten up. When I went to fetch tea I would go to the dalit section. I was the only boy among the workers and so they were very sympathetic towards me. Everybody in the mill knew my father and hence they knew me either as 'son of Shiva Contrati' or 'Cheher's son' (after my mother). At times somebody would enquire: 'What, have you given up your studies?'

Or somebody else would comment: 'You haven't given up your studies have you? Which class do you study in?'

I learnt the lessons of life along with my studies. During the afternoon break after serving tea to Pitaji I would sit in a corner and read. Once I was reading the autobiography of Indulal Yagnik. The chief engineer was on his rounds of the section. When he came near the boiler, he saw me reading. He came up to me and took the book in his hand and said: 'After you finish reading it, lend it to me.'

This chief engineer never conversed with any labourers, and so when he talked to me Pitaji was very pleased.

Pitaji never held a child. He loved children dearly but in my grandmother's or other elderly persons' presence, he never picked

any of us or played with us. I do not remember ever being in his lap! But then no men ever did those days, especially in the presence of elderly people. This was a way of showing deference to the elders. When I was small I used to tease Dadi and Ma in my childish prattle. Once I called my grandmother an old woman and had teased her by saying, 'Here take this sweet, old hag'. Pitaji heard this and he slapped me; that was the first and last slap he ever gave me. My grandfather was not alive so he used to be very careful about Dadi's honour. Once she became very anxious about Pitaji because he had very casually mentioned that he often thought of committing suicide. After that she could not sleep at night for a long time and tried to help him come out of this phase. When Ma got to know about it, she became very anxious. She would not let him be by himself and talked only of positive things in her effort to bring him out of this mental state.

When Pitaji was passing through severe financial difficulties, some astrologer had called it the evil influence of the Saturn. Hence he used to fast every Saturday. He would send me to the grocer to buy two paise worth of oil and vermillion in a bowl. When the shopkeeper saw me he would ask, 'Alya, who is it for?'

'For my Bapa,' I would answer. After I returned with it Pitaji would stir that oil and hand it back to me to take it to our dalit temple to offer it to Lord Hanuman. When I set out to go to the temple Ma would instruct me: 'Wash your hands and feet and then go.'

I would then go to the temple in our moholla and offer oil and vermillion to Lord Hanuman. I would sit there closing my eyes and meditate for sometime. Whenever Swami Charandas saw me at the temple he would ask me: 'O Purush, have you come to make an offering?'

Swami Charandas always addressed me with the honorific title of Purush though I was small. He used to be very pleased to see me seated with closed eyes. When he met me on the street he called out from a distance addressing me as 'O Purush'. It was his presence that made me go to the temple, even when I did not have any offering to make. I would bathe and sit there with closed eyes and pray, though at that time I knew nothing about meditation. After my offering I would take the bowl of oil and vermillion

from the feet of the deity and dip my finger in the mixture to draw a tika on my forehead. I also carried the mixture for Pitaji. He too would put it on his forehead. My grandmother would be pleased to see me do this ritual and Ma used to be happy to see this mark on my forehead.

One day when I had gone to collect wood, suddenly there was a dust storm. It was evening and it became so dusty that nothing was visible even at a distance of one hand. Pitaji went towards the field to look for me and we met at the shrine of Bhadiad Pir. When he saw me safe and well he was overjoyed. We returned home together and Ma was relieved to see me. She embraced me and said: 'Curse the wretched wood, come home on time.'

One day Pitaji came home from the mill very dejected. I happened to listen to Ma and Pitaji's conversation. Ma was telling him: 'You gave him this job and that's why he has now become so cocky, isn't it? How he throws his weight around!'

Pitaji was very angry. From their conversation I came to know that a labourer had insulted Pitaji, and he had even tried to hurt him by throwing a shuttle at him. The shuttles used in mills have sharp pointed iron edges on both ends. I heard Ma tell him, 'It was good that the shuttle missed you. I can't imagine what would have happened otherwise?'

Pitaji answered, 'Had I not moved away on time it would have pierced my throat.'

Ma shivered at the thought of the shuttle piercing his throat. He would then have been in hospital. I shivered to think what could have happened to him. I was reading a book when I heard this conversation. Pitaji or Ma had no inkling of this. I was filled with anger at the way the labourer had betrayed my father. There was a large meat knife in the house. I searched it out, and stuck it in my shorts and covered it with my shirt. Then I went out saying, 'I'm coming'.

That labourer lived in a room in the chawls of the mill. I was so incensed that I did not even realize when and how I reached his house. I had decided that I was going to push that knife into his stomach. But I found a lock on his door. I waited for him in front of his room. Meanwhile Punabhai's wife passed by with her goat. Punabhai and his wife lived in the fourth room from this labourer's

room. They used to work with Pitaji. Everybody in my house knew them. When our family had gone on a trip to Pavagadh, Punabhai had accompanied us. While climbing Pavagadh hill he had carried me in his arms. When his wife saw me there she took me to their house. They did not know anything about this fight. We found Punabhai at home. He was delighted to see me. He was a very pleasant person. His face had a certain glow. It radiated happiness. I was very fond of him and had great respect for him. I was offered a glass of water and made to sit near him. He started to tell me funny stories and laughed while narrating them. He had seen us in our better times and now he was deeply saddened by our present condition. He loved me dearly. His affection and the way he talked to me slowly calmed me down. Though I did not tell him why I had come there, I asked him casually what time that labourer would return home. He replied, 'He will go straight to his village after work.'Punabhai was intrigued by my question. He knew that the labourer had gone against Pitaji and when they found me at his door they were worried. When I left to go home, he accompanied me till the cinema hall. I came home dejected and quietly put the knife away.

Once our moholla was struck by a great disaster. Everybody's face was grief-stricken and all talked in low tones. I ran to my friend Shakra's house. His father had been run over by a train. I came to know from the whispers all around that his father had committed suicide. His mother and other members of the family were weeping. When I drew aside the sheet that covered him I found his hewn body lying on the cot. I thought of Pitaji's conversation with Dadi on suicide.

5. In Search of Dung

I often went to the fields to collect cow dung and firewood with my friend Manilal. At times we had to carry our baskets all the way to the nearby forest because we could come back only when the baskets were full. Our necks would ache with the load on our heads and we would often stop to rest on the way. The firewood that we collected from the field was an assortment of different woods—cactus, arani, and aval. I knew quite a lot about plants at that time. I knew which plants were edible and which were not. But there were times when we would get wood from trees we did not know the names of. Once when I had cut aakdo from the field I saw a green and yellow striped snake entwined round it. This was a very poisonous one and it is believed that it sucks the sap of cactus and aakdo. Its breath can be fatal; it can putrefy the skin.

Our stoves were lit with woods of not only aval but also babool, neem, mango, kesudo, mahudo, tamarind and dry stalks of cotton. These burnt in our earthen stove as if they were sanctified sticks used in the holy fire! When we could not get dry wood we would cut green cactus from the fence of abandoned farms. These were then cut into small pieces and dried in the sun on the rooftop. Whatever could burn was collected from the field and carried home. Before the monsoon we would gather two months' supply of firewood and store it in the loft. We also collected all kinds of dung to make dung cakes, which were dried to be used later. While collecting the dung we had to be careful about dog shit and this we did by smelling the dung. Dry dung of camel, goat and lamb were also used as fuel. Sometimes when we goofed up the dung would give out a foul smell when it burnt in the stove. If this happened when Ma was cooking she would grumble: 'Can't you be a little careful! This stink gives me a headache.'

Then she would throw that piece away from the stove and the house would be filled with smoke. In the mohalla many people would get half-burnt coals and coal dust from the railway tracks, and then mix them with silt and dung to make cakes, which they dried in the sun and would use as fuel. Ma made them slightly differently; she powdered dry cotton stalks and mixed them with dung. I do not recall that we had ever spent any money on firewood. I would collect so much firewood that in winter we would make a bonfire and sit around telling stories to each other.

Once Manilal and I went very far in search of wood to the far end of the farm located near the Shiva temple in the village. I saw a lump of dung from a distance and immediately told Manilal: 'Look here, Mania, that lump is mine.'

Once I had marked it he could not touch it; only I had a claim over it. When I went to collect it, my eyes were on the lookout for other lumps in the farm and then suddenly the lump moved. It was a snake curled up; it had looked like a lump of dung from a distance. When I came near it, the snake uncurled and slithered past at great speed like a stream of floodwater. I was stunned by the thought of what would have happened if I had touched it unmindfully. The field used to be full of snakes. Once I saw a python encircling a tree; another time I saw a snake that had swallowed a bird and was lying with a bulging middle. I had even seen a snake swimming in the pond of watercress. There were innumerable burrows all around. The fights of mongoose and snake were common sights but I had once seen a fight between a peacock and a snake. This happened on my way to Borisana village. The peacock had attacked the snake so fiercely that it was bleeding profusely and yet it had raised its hood and hissed angrily at the peacock. The peacock flew away to a short distance, then came back and struck the wounded snake and moved away to have a better look. And I was not the only witness to this fight; a monkey on the treetop too looked with interest. Monkeys usually kill snakes by catching them by the mouth and then dashing them on the ground. Once a snake starts to bleed there is no hope of its survival. Ants are attracted by the sweet taste of its blood and in no time they devour and shred it to pieces. Such sights were common and I was fortunate to watch nature's own creatures fighting such battles of survival in the lap of Mother Nature.

Our forays into farms to gather firewood were not always easy. Once when four or five of us had gone to collect wood we started to play hide-and-seek and we were so engrossed in the game that we did not realize that the owner of the farm was approaching. I was on a high branch of the tree and suddenly I saw the others, one after the other, jump from the tree and scoot. I jumped from that height and picked up my basket and ran. The owner could not run as fast as I could. Even today I shudder to think what would have happened on that day and it astonishes me how fear of being beaten up or rather the fear of being beaten to death had propelled me to jump from such a great height. As they say, fear instils such tremendous energy in a man that when he finds a tiger chasing him he would even jump across a well.

We played different games while we were in the field. Once we came across a dead sparrow, and we decided to conduct a proper funeral. To carry out its last rites we needed *ladva* (laddoo, the well-known sweetmeat). We collected the small fruit of the banyan tree and used these instead.

In the forest when we collected twigs of mahuada we filled our stomach with its fresh flowers and then carried the rest home. Ma would dry these flowers, pound them and make a delicious sweet. We gathered dodi greens and its fruit from the hedges. Ma cooked the greens and we ate its fruit and even its fresh leaves. Scorpions were aplenty and I would often use a stick to drive one away before collecting dung or wood. Often a scorpion would be spotted after the pile was brought home. It would be killed immediately. We even had a scorpion song with a refrain '*hambo hambo*'. When a scorpion bit somebody in the moholla, seeing how that person suffered would make me deeply upset. When this happened to a child, its screams and tears made me cry. There was a belief among us that after a scorpion bites the poison spreads in the body very rapidly and it could be arrested only if somebody called out loudly '*dhhondho, dhhondho, dhhondho.*' Of course I never had any chance to verify this.

One day a tremendous sandstorm took place suddenly when we were collecting dry twigs in a mango orchard. Some lumps of dung had tempted us to venture inside the orchard though usually we stayed away from it. But on that particular day nobody was

around, so Manilal and I mustered up courage to go in. The gusty winds made the mangoes fall to the ground from the trees. Both Manilal and I were thrilled to find ourselves in a situation where nobody, not even the owner, was around and keeping one eye on the opening in the hedge we started to run around the orchard collecting mangoes. On that day we filled our baskets with mangoes instead of dung. Manilal could not lift the heavy basket on his head so I helped him to put it on his head and I carried mine. We walked fast and when we crossed the hedge and came out of the orchard we found an old man walking in front of us. We crossed him as we were walking very fast and he said, 'Diyoro, whom have you looted today?'

A current of fear passed through us. Manilal replied, 'We found these on the ground. The storm made them fall. We did not pluck from the tree.'

We were fortunate that the storm had not abated and so he was probably too worried about the storm to bother about us. We quickened our speed and luckily he did not question us any further.

When I reached home with the basket and Ma saw the mangoes she was terror-stricken. She immediately asked, 'Whose farm have you brought these from?'

'From the mango grove.'

'Stupid boy, you shouldn't have done it! Has anyone seen you? Mangoes bring ill luck. Don't ever do such a thing.'

My mother was very frightened. She feared that the owner would come looking for me and would strike my head off!

I had another friend who accompanied me when I went to collect firewood. His name was Mangabhai. A farm had a date palm tree and one day we were so busy collecting twigs that we did not realize that we were very close to this tree. Manga climbed the tree and started to drop ripe dates on the ground, which I picked and collected in the basket. Suddenly he jumped from the top branch of the tree and picking up the wicker basket he cried out, 'Bhikha run,' and started to do so. I saw that the owner of the farm was coming towards us with a raised staff. I ran as fast as I could. When he realized that he would not be able to catch me, he flung his staff at me. It just missed my feet by a few inches and then we sped away with redoubled speed. That day we escaped

from him all right. Had we been caught we would have been beaten to death. We could run extremely fast. Once I remember we did not let a snake catch up with us. It is believed that if a snake chases a man, however fast he runs it is bound to catch up with him because it runs as fast as water in spate. Once in the same farm we had gone to pick dates and when Manga was getting ready to climb he saw a snake slithering toward us. We ran and when we looked back we saw that the snake was coming at a great speed. We doubled our speed. This time it was a question of life and death. I do not think we had ever in our life had to run such a distance at such a speed. We were panting when we reached the abode of Dhansima and we were relieved to find that the snake was nowhere around.

6. Quenching of Thirst

One afternoon Magan and I were wandering in the field when he said, 'Look Bhikha, look at the quarter moon!'

I looked at the sky and was completely baffled. Moon at mid-day and that too a quarter moon!

When Magan saw my bewilderment he said, 'Alya, not in the sky. Look there, at the well.'

I turned around and saw a girl drawing water from the well. We burst out laughing.

I liked Magan's sense of humour and said, 'How would you describe us, the boys who go to draw water from the well?'

His prompt answer was, 'Stumps of babool.'

The first tree that he could think of was babool—after all he was only giving voice to the image he carried in his heart! He knew the pain of the thorns of babool because the stumps of babool and their piercing thorns were a part of our lives.

In Kalol our well was at a distance from the moholla, on the bank of the lake. The municipality had not provided the mohalla with a direct supply of water. Water had to be fetched from the well. I would place an indhoni—a ring of cloth—on my head and then on it put a small pot and on top of it another large copper pot and go with other boys to the well. The indhonis were usually made of jute but at times we twisted our loincloth into a ring and used it as an indhoni. The jute ones often hurt our heads, especially when they were new. When young brides came to their in-laws house for the first time, they brought beautiful beaded indhonis. We would often race balancing pots on our heads, holding one or two under our arms. We played another game called thega thega, which involved carrying water-filled pots on the head and walking fast without touching the pots. The girls always carried pots this way and some of the boys could also do it but I never mastered this skill.

The well was a busy place; there were quarrels as well as clattering of pots, and at times the clatter of the pots would cover the noise of the quarrel but occasionally there would also be a song from one of the moholla women. We fastened a rope around the neck of the pot and then threw it into the well, and gradually drew it out. Often some thirsty dalit would come to quench his thirst. He would cup his two palms together and drink water that would be poured into it. Whenever we had to quench our thirst outside the moholla we cupped our palms together. This is how I drank at school; the cupped palms were my glass.

A legend says that Lord Krishna teased gopis by breaking their water pots. The pots that the gopis used then must have been earthenware, not the copper and brass pots that we had. Much has been written in our literature about the paniharis—women who fetch water—and their delicate feet. Many poems and songs have been composed on them and our folktales and fables are full of them. Besides such romantic tales there are many sorrowful tales about the paniharis. The well was the only place in the village where womenfolk spoke of their woes. There were always stories of women who had ended their sorrow by drowning in the well. For those who came from cities their woeful life began with having to learn to draw water from the well. Indeed many parents would not marry their daughters into villages which had water shortage.

When I went to fetch water from the well I carried a rope on my shoulder. The women tied the rope tightly around the neck of the pot like the hangman's noose. They would even check to ensure it would not come out when it was thrown into the well. Sometimes if the rope was worn out, it would break and the pot would fall at the bottom of the well. Once when I was in such a situation the grapnel wielder showed his skill by bringing up the pot hooked into his grapnel. If the pot got stuck in the mud at the bottom of the well it was a difficult task to bring it out.

Though there is so much in our literature on wells and paniharis, nothing has been written about the plight of the dalit women who had to wander about from farm to farm and to wells for a few drops of water. In the villages where the dalits did not have their separate wells, dalit women had to beg for water from the upper caste women. A dalit woman would stand at some distance from the well and wait for some kind upper caste woman to take pity on her and pour water into the pot, avoiding any physical contact with her. The poor woman would be overjoyed as if she had been given a treasure and would bless the kind soul who took pity on her from the bottom of her heart. This pain has not found expression anywhere. Only one fourth of the earth is land, the rest is water, and yet for a share of this free bounty of nature dalit women have had to suffer so much. They have had to spend many sleepless nights, and imagine their plight during famines when even the upper caste people of the village would pine for water. In many villages, they would be denied water from the lake and even from the cattle troughs. Perhaps the high caste people were afraid that their cattle would get polluted! Or may be the trough would get polluted!! Today in this new age there are water storage tanks and pipelines that carry water to the dalit mohollas. This pipeline passes through the colonies of Thakores and Rabaris, and it carries no stigma then, but when it reaches the dalit moholla it gets polluted! The water of the same storage tank when it reaches the dalits' area is considered to be dirty!

When I went to collect firewood or dung in the field I could not quench my thirst anywhere. In the scorching heat of summer when my neck would ache with the load of the basket I had to drink from the watercourse in the farms or

from the canals. I would bend down to collect water into my cupped palms and drink.

Harima, a dalit woman, had laughingly narrated her experience to us: on a hot summer afternoon when she had gone to collect firewood she was desperately thirsty and looked all around for water to quench her thirst. But where would she find water? If she approached any farmer, one look at the pile of wood on her head and they would hustle her out of their farm or snatch her wood, curse her and beat her up. Her throat was so parched that she could not breathe. Then she suddenly spotted a cow urinating. She cupped her hand and drank the urine. Mother cow had quenched her thirst that day!

7. The Bitch's Fury

On the day of Makar Sankranti (the winter solstice), beggars came for alms early in the morning. Ma would put a handful of millet in their bags. Cows were fed with a bundle of hay to earn good deeds. In our house even when there were no grains for us we would somehow buy some to give as alms. What a fine provision our religion has made for a person to feel important. On that day, an army of beggars would descend on the moholla. They would call out very proudly, '*Khamma maara Jadavda. . .khamma . . . ghani khamma maara jadavdane*'(Long live my Jadavs, very long life to them) and those who gave a handful of grains also took pride in giving the alms. This was like beggars coming to beggars for alms. Though this day is celebrated by offering charity, it was the day of collecting kites for me.

I loved the festival of kites. Fifteen days before the festival we would fly, plunder and collect kites. There were kite fights in the

air and once an opponent cut a kite it would trail in the air. I had a stick to wind the thread of the trailing kite. Usually I would run along with other younger boys after the older boys with these sticks but we would manage to get only torn ones that the older boys would throw away. These we would repair by sticking thin paper on the torn parts with the thick milky substance that oozed out of the cactus. Often these kites had so many patches that it was difficult to see the original one. I would run around the moholla holding the string of such a kite. There were fights over kites and very often in the tussle the kite would be torn and nobody would get it. It was fun to collect threads of cut kites as I could then use them to fly my kite. Pitaji did not approve of kite flying and I do not remember him ever buying a kite for me. The main reason was of course the paucity of funds. Collecting threads was quite a job. Once I cut my finger badly and the only medicine Pitaji advised was tying the wound with a wet bandage. This helped and the wound healed.

Before Makar Sankranti could be celebrated many mishaps would occur in the moholla. Many boys were bitten by dogs while running after kites or had fallen and hurt themselves badly by trying to pull kites from trees and would have to be taken to hospital. There were fights over kites with the neighbouring Patels and Thakores, which at times resulted in stone pelting and sometimes they would come to our moholla and beat up the boys. There were cases where a boy would be electrocuted while trying to recover a kite from electricity poles.

The readying of threads for kite fights was a big event in the moholla before the Uttarayan day. The older boys would apply glue, juice of aloe, fine glass dust and at times even egg to the thread. Not trusting the adulterated glass dust sold in the market, many would pound glass pieces at home. For kids like me it was done to save money. All these ingredients would be boiled together to make a thick paste. Sometimes cooked rice or sago was also added to this paste, which would then be applied to the thread. It was fun to cut others' kites with such sharp and smooth thread. Some used more glass dust to enable the thread to cut well. The threads were so sharp that it would pierce fingers and so boys would wear a cap to protect their

fingers. Smaller kids like me would prepare the thread by dipping the skein into the mixture and then tying it around a leg of the charpoy to dry it. Nobody in the moholla could afford the 'sankal ath' brand of thread and so they had to be satisfied with 'genda' and 'kohinoor' brands. I of course never had any money to buy even these brands. Only once I coaxed my brother-in-law to buy me five annas worth of cock brand skein of thread. This I readied myself and with this thread I managed to cut many kites.

In our moholla the number of people who ran around to collect cut kites was greater than those who flew the kites. Our eyes would be glued to the sky right from morning and as soon as a kite was sighted there would be shouts of 'there it comes . . . there . . . there' and we would run after it. The kites were of different colours and designs—plain, striped, with stars, and so on. They had different names depending on their size: fudia, ghensia, pavala, adadhia, tukkal. It was fun to watch one with a long tail. The older boys would often allow us to hold the string once the kite was flying steadily in the sky.

One day at the entrance of the moholla, near the watercourse, I was atop a wall, busy flying a kite. We used to refer to this wall as vando. The land inside this wall belonged to a bania, and to prevent any physical contact with us he had built this wall around his land. A blacksmith used to live there at that time. If anyone of us climbed the wall he would shower us with curses and at times chase us with a stick. Some boys would climb this wall clandestinely to fly kites because we considered it to be our terrace. The width of this wall was not much but the older boys managed not to fall from it, though sometimes, younger boys did fall down. Such minor injuries did not draw much attention, but there was one fall that is still etched in my memory. My body carries not only the scars of that incident; there are deep dents as well. I was on the wall, flying a kite when suddenly I saw the blacksmith and I jumped. I fell right in the midst of the small puppies that a bitch had delivered sometime back. When a bitch gives birth to pups she becomes ferociously protective towards them and here I had fallen right on them. She at once pounced on me. The increasing wails of its pups drove her to attack me with fury. We had collected money when she had

delivered her pups to buy flour and vegetable shortening to make sheera for her and so she was well fed. Frightened for her pups, she forgot our hospitality and started to bite me on my knees and calf muscles with all her strength. There was a deep wound on my knees and she even bit off pieces of flesh from my leg. I cried out in pain and shouted for help and she refused to let go of me. Tears flowed down my eyes and it mixed with the snot of my nose and the blood that oozed out of my wound. The bitch knew me well. I had often played with her puppies, patted her, opened her mouth to push a piece of rotlo; but today she refused to recognize me because she thought that I had tried to harm her dear puppies. People gathered around me when they heard my screams but how were they going to save me from her? They were scared of being bitten by her and hence from a distance they tried to shoo her away. But that mad bitch would not be dissuaded. Finally, exhausted, she slowed down and then she responded to the call of 'Lali, Lali.' People stroked her back and drew her away from me. She seemed to regain her senses but I was about to lose mine. I was then brought home and looking at my state Ma cursed all those who were around when this had happened. She did not spare the bitch. Immediately all the old women in the neighbourhood gathered and one of them emptied her snuffbox and covered my wounds with snuff. Then a two paise coin was placed on it and the wound was bandaged. Nobody took me to a doctor. Somebody said something about giving me fourteen injections for rabies but who had the money to spare for it? For a few days I was not allowed to move around but soon the wounds healed. There have been many such wounds in life that have eventually healed but even after so many years a deeply dented scar caused by the bitch's bite remains on my leg.

8. Smallpox

I have narrowly escaped from death many times and have often felt that some power was responsible to save me in the nick of time. Once I had a very bad attack of smallpox. My entire body, except for the pupils of the eyes, were covered with smallpox rashes. My parents were worried about the possible loss of eyesight but the fear of offending Balia Bapa, the deity, prevented them from taking me to a doctor. I was treated with home remedies and old beliefs. A bunch of neem leaves were hung on the doorway and I was not allowed to look at red cloth. During this period we could not bathe, or wash clothes, or borrow a light from the neighbours for our stove or diya. The neem leaves stopped people from visiting us. Even the beggars would avoid our house. Neem leaves are supposed to be a preventive measure against this disease and also acted as a warning to others. Hence nobody came to meet us and no member of the family visited others. The reason for the restriction on bathing and washing must have stemmed from a desire to prevent the spread of this waterborne infectious disease. The fear of invoking the wrath of Shitala Mata was added to this scientific reason to ensure its practice.

I had such a virulent attack that people recoiled when they looked at me: my face could not be recognized. My friends could not visit me and my mother spent sleepless nights at my bedside worrying about me. Gradually the blisters subsided and shrank, leaving the skin dry and itchy. My hands were covered with cloth so that I would not scratch. The dry flaky skin of the rashes peeled off, leaving deep marks on my face. These are visible even today and my skin darkened.

After I had fully recovered from the disease I was taken to the shrine of Balia Bapa for paying obeisance. My mother had vowed to offer meat to the deity because I had had a very serious attack.

She had boiled whole wheat and bought red and yellow paper from the grocer. Then she carried all these to the shrine of Balia Bapa. On such occasions a large contingent of kids from the moholla would accompany the person visiting the shrine. The house would be filled with people of all ages at the time of leaving, and many others would join the group on the way. Children showed a great deal of enthusiasm as if they were a part of a celebration. The women of the moholla sang on the way and the entire visit wore a festive air.

The shrine of Balia Bapa was at a distance from the moholla. High caste people also visited the shrine to fulfil their vows. Ma was not allowed to pray close to the shrine so she kept her offering of meat and other things at a distance. She then chanted and carried out the stipulated rituals from a distance, heeding the rules of untouchability. At this small shrine a woman would help the high caste women with their rituals and in our case she would not touch anything we offered, but she did not hesitate to take the money that was a part of the offering.

There were many kinds of vows taken at shrines and abodes of different Goddesses. When a child was ill for a long time, or was believed to have been a target of witchcraft, then a vow of an offering would be made at the abode of Joganima. At the time of making the offering, everybody, old and young, would accompany the person who had taken the vow to the abode. There would be much singing on the way as the place was very far away, located in a farm known as Joganima's farm. A special sweet–sukhadi–would be made as an offering. Sweets were a rarity, so for us it was an occasion of a feast. Many would ask for a second helping and the host would oblige willingly; however, when somebody came for the third time he or she would be scolded.

If somebody had taken a vow to Dhansima then we would all troop down to her little shrine. It was not really a shrine, just a few bricks had been put together and we called it 'Dhansima ni Daheri'. This vow was taken when a child suffered from severe cough or whooping cough. A special sweet called kuler would be made with millet flour and jaggery. A portion of this sweet would be placed around ant's nest and the rest would be distributed among children. We loved to eat this kuler.

Besides these kinds of vows there were also regular religious festivals, which were celebrated with great fervour. Among all religious discourses, the one on Lord Satyanarayan was of special significance. This discourse was held when a vow had been fulfilled, or for the welfare of the family, or when there was some good news. It was a kind of thanksgiving ritual. A low square stool would be placed in the middle and four plantain leaves would be tied to its four legs. Then the kathakar would begin the katha by reciting, '*Dhan diwali thayee aaj, hari mak jowane*' (On this auspicious day of Diwali let us listen to the name of Hari). The entire moholla would gather to listen to this katha. The family who held this function had to spend a good amount of money because sheera—wheat halwa—and fruits had to be offered and then distributed to all who had gathered there. Garo Maharaj recited this katha. Before he began he would go around the moholla and invite everybody. The children of course would start to gather when the banana leaves were brought for the puja. The entire population of the moholla—young and old—would listen with rapt attention. The Shastras had stipulated that if ever a shudra were to listen even to one word of the katha he or she should be severely punished by hot lead being poured into the ears. But then this was not a katha recited by a brahmin; it was conducted by a dalit brahmin (even among the dalits there exists a strict caste hierarchy e.g. Vankars, Chamars, Senvas, Turis, Garos, and others. Garos carry out the priestly duties) so I suppose there was no injunction against it!

At my house we had kathas as well as *paths*. Usually people who were slightly better off would organize a path because it involved a good amount of expense. But every household would have to do it at least once for their children. In my case, my parents had to organize a path at the time of my initiation ceremony when I would be put under a religious guru because otherwise I would be known as *naguro*: one without a guru. My father had to borrow money to organize this path. The head priest of our Gebi Temple usually conducted it. It started at eleven at night and continued till early dawn amidst singing of bhajans and playing of drums and cymbals. Plates of tea and beedi and matchsticks would be circulated among the singers.

The room would be filled with smoke and the stench of perspiration and yet people would be completely engrossed in singing to the strumming of tanpura and beats of the drums and cymbals. Along with other children I would fall off to sleep and at the time of conducting the ritual of initiation I would be awakened. The Gebi Temple was inside our moholla and its head priest, Dharmadas Mahant, was a much respected person. For the people of the moholla he was everybody's guru. He was lame and moved around on a crutch. He was short tempered and when he got angry he would curse everybody. There was another person in the temple called Charandas Swami who had travelled widely to many religious places. He was fun loving and had a very pleasant countenance and would always give me a nice smile. He sang with a lot of fervour. Mahantji would intersperse his singing with stories from the Puranas. On this occasion sheera would be made for all, but the Mahanta would be served malpuda, a pancake-like sweet in syrup.

On the day of Janamasthami, the birth of Lord Krishna was celebrated at midnight. At that time the temple would resound with the sounds of beating of drums, clanging of cymbals and blowing of conch shells. The whole moholla would throng to the temple and crane to watch the birth of Lord Krishna. Once I too was very eager and went early and managed a seat right in the front row. At the stroke of twelve the drums and cymbals and conch resounded loudly but I did not get to see any birth of Lord Krishna. I never went again as I was convinced that this was how the birth must be taking place every year. We were given a pinch of sugar as prasad. We would put a paise or an anna in front of the Mahant, touch his feet, and in return he would give us a pinch of sugar. Women and children would dance all night around the idol of the child Krishna and sing songs like '*Mara nandjina lal, ras ramantha mari nathani khowani*' (O the son of Nandji, I've lost my nose ring while dancing). On the day of Janmasthami people wore new clothes and children like me who did not have new clothes would wear washed clothes. Everybody wanted to earn a bit on this festival day so some gambled while others sold balloons, biscuits and candies. I bought the balloons in dozens and candies by weight. Sometimes I boiled whole grams and then sprinkled salt and chilli

powder and sold these by calling out '*channa jor garam,channa jor garam*' (hot spicy channa, hot spicy channa). This way I was able to earn something. We spent the night with a lot of mirth and fun and at daybreak at around five or six we carried the idol, singing all the way to the lake. There we would immerse the idol in the water and take a bath at the well side. Some would plunge into the lake. However the lake was full of filth and slime so most people would draw water from our dalit well and finish their bath. The moholla girls too bathed there, fully clothed.

Once I jumped into the lake when I saw others splashing in it. I followed the boys for quite some distance. But then I slipped and my foot got stuck in the mud at the bottom. In the dry season when the water dried up people would dig out silt from the bottom of the lake. This would leave big potholes at the bottom and I was stuck in one of those. I did not know swimming and so could not come up. I was sinking and I tried desperately to come out. Bababhai, who had accompanied us, was swimming close by with other boys but no one had any inkling about my condition. I do not know what prompted me but in the struggle to survive I somehow gave a strong push and I came up. Even today I am not sure how I did it. My mother, of course, said I had narrowly escaped death by water and that it had been predicted.

9. Lockjaw

The municipality of Kalol had built public latrines far from our moholla, on the other side of our well near the building that housed old animals. There was no distinction between dalits and the other caste people as far as the latrines were concerned—everyone used them. Many would combine the task of fetching water for the house with attending to the call of nature so that no time was wasted. At some distance, behind these latrines, there were pits where the dead

animals were brought and dismembered and large numbers of vultures hung around. Their long red necks and sharp beaks were rather scary, but then I was scared of even kites because once when a kite had swooped down to snatch a small packet from my hand it had scratched my finger and blood had spurted out as if a knife had pricked my finger. Thank God it was only a scratch because if the finger had been caught between its beaks it would have been broken into two. From that time I have been afraid of kites and especially of vultures because of their large size. At a short distance from these vultures, a pack of ferocious dogs moved around. They were just stray dogs but by gorging on dead meat they had become quite fearless. The vultures were afraid of these dogs. The dogs would chase the vultures away but the vultures would circle above and swoop down again for the dismembered pieces of animals near the pit. At times when the dogs were busy chewing bones, a vulture would fly down suddenly and pick up a bone or a piece of meat. The dog would then chase the big bird but it would fly high into the sky. Generally, dogs never managed to catch these birds, but sometimes when one did, it would tear the bird into pieces.

There were fights between dogs and vultures and between men and vultures over meat. Sometimes the dogs had such fierce looks while fighting that people would keep away from them. The dogs of course knew the men who dismembered cattle so they never harmed them but sometimes when the dogs were very fierce even these men had to be careful about the dogs. Others never dared to visit the place. At times a dog would carry a piece of meat into one of these latrines and after it had finished eating, a vulture would enter to finish off whatever was left. When this happened anyone who was in the latrine would run away. There was also a garbage heap in front of the latrines where the cows were let loose. It was a familiar scene of a cow or a donkey with a wound on its body wandering around, and a hoard of flies hovering on its wound. Occasionally, a vulture or a kite would peck at this festering wound, and the cow would try to chase it away by flicking its tail.

There were many tales of 'ghosts' and 'dakans' presence in these latrines. The news that some woman had become a spirit and was seen wandering in the latrines would spread in the moholla. The latrines for women were at a little distance, but higher caste women

did not use the latrines at night. They would squat in the open and if they saw a man approaching they would get up immediately. If it were someone she knew, she would turn her face or cover her face with her sari pallu so that she would not be recognized. She would squat again as soon as he left. Some who were a little shy or respectable would squat near the garbage heap in such a way that they would not be seen. But sometimes a wild boar or a dog would come and at such times she had to shoo away the creature and again squat. These women often carried on a conversation among themselves in this position. At night, the fear of ghosts and dakan often made many sit on the roadside and defecate, unmindful of the traffic around. Only when the lights of a passing vehicle fell directly on them would they get up. The men folk usually went right up to the latrines at night but kept the door open. However, those who were afraid would, like the women folk, squat anywhere around.

One evening when I came out of the latrine I could not open my mouth; my jaws were locked. I tried hard to open my teeth but I could not. I put down my latrine can and tried with both hands but was unable to move my jaws even a little. I looked around but found no one close by. At a distance I saw some women squatting in the open but because my jaws were locked I could not call aloud. I was so busy trying to open my mouth I did not realize that I had reached the outskirts of the town near the Bhadiadi mosque. And then suddenly I realized I could open my mouth. I was so overjoyed that I immediately rushed home to tell my mother. But Ma started to worry. She muttered something about some unfortunate soul possessing me. She immediately lit a lamp in front of the photograph of Maha Kalimata kept in the niche near the door. Every day Ma used to light a lamp in the name of Mahakali, and both she and Dadi used to say that we had the blessings of Mataji and so no harm would come on us. Indeed people of our moholla believed that our moholla had her special blessing. Once Kalol was under the grip of cholera and people were dying in large numbers. It was virtually a dance of death: before people could come back after cremating a body another one was ready. At that time, ours was the only moholla where there were no deaths. Everybody considered this to be Mataji's blessing, so most residents of the moholla worshiped her and lit a diya every day. On the night of the Kali Chaudash a special garbo

for Mahakali was organized. The next two nights, Diwali and the New Year, everybody danced around this garbo, singing songs in praise of Mataji. On the third day the garbo was brought to the permanent place of Mataji near Payaga Shala. It would be taken around Kalol town and when it reached the tower square of the town almost the entire dalit population would have gathered there.

Even today I have not been able to solve the riddle of the incident of lockjaw. I have often wandered; who and why should any spirit possess me and then release me. I could understand if it had possessed a woman. Or did the spirit commit an error and when it realized its mistake, it left me? Who would want to have anything to do with a boy who searched for copper coins in dead corpses' mouths? It is possible that it left me because I was near the mosque of the holy Pir. Ma had said at that time, 'It must have realized that it had reached its boundary line and dared not cross it.' Was its boundary only up to the Pir's mosque?

I have never been able to understand this question of jurisdiction of ghosts and spirits. Sometimes in the moholla a daughter-in-law who was visiting her in-laws for the first time became a victim of a spirit. She would go around without her pallu on her head, begging for tea and beedi. She would laugh aloud, or cry in a strange way or even become unconscious. This behaviour was highly unbecoming of a new bride who would otherwise have her head covered; in fact her pallu would be pulled right up to her bosom. When she became unconscious, somebody would hold a shoe near her nose and she would gain consciousness. A crowd would gather around her and she would become a target of derision and joke. People would speculate about the identity of the spirit. Other young brides would not be allowed to go near her by their mothers-in-law in the fear that the spirit might possess them. The crowd would shower the victim with questions like, 'From where have you come?' 'Whose daughter-in-law are you?' 'Why have you come here?'

This young girl would ordinarily keep her face covered with her pallu and even when she answered a question she would hold her pallu between her teeth so that it would not fall. She would keep her voice so very low that her jeth may not hear her. How would such a girl laugh loudly? But when she was

possessed by a spirit she would not cover her head, she would look boldly at everybody and laugh loudly, ask for beedi, tea and ganthia. Someone experienced in the way of spirits would at once know the reason and then he would question her, 'Answer me, do you want to leave this body or not?'

The spirit would decline and answer back, 'When I have such a pretty body to inhabit and good food to eat, why should I leave?'

After this the spirit would be threatened with many dire consequences. They would threaten to beat the girl or burn her and if in spite of this it refused to leave the body of the girl, the bhuva, the exorcist, would be called. Looking at the bhuva the girl would get a little scared. The bhuva would ask her, 'Answer me, what do you want? Tell me what you want to eat and what other things do you desire? You'll get them, but after that you'll have to leave without any fuss. If you don't then see what I do to you.'

She would get intimidated and ask for various things to eat. But sometimes the spirit was adamant and then the bhuva would show his power. Then she would reply, 'Don't do anything to me, I'm leaving.'

And immediately she would start to run towards the the entrance of the moholla. There she would finally fall down and lose consciousness. After a while she would become normal and immediately realizing the situation she would pull her pallu over her head, rearrange her sari, and go back home.

During the festival of Navratri the drumbeats would be heard from a distance. Ma would never let me go there. She would say, 'No you can't go there. Mataji makes her visit and she takes young children in her grip.'

I used to be frightened of falling into Mataji's grip as a child. I would listen to these drum beats lying in my bed and go off to sleep. Sometimes when I woke up at night, the sound of the drums could be still heard. A friend of mine was so scared of these drumbeats that he would not even get up at night to urinate. But once I managed to enter this place. I saw the bhuva and his assistants sing in melodious voices songs in praise of Mataji. I enjoyed listening to these songs. Conducting the rituals of appeasing the Goddess the bhuva would say, 'Come Ma, come to us; we are your children.'

The atmosphere was quite frightening. The bhuva's angry and contemptuous voice and the trickle of perspiration on his body would scare us. The owner of the place and other adults around would push us out saying: 'What's so special here?'

'Alya, how did you all enter this place?'

'Go away. You cannot sit here.'

'You are still very young. There's plenty of time for all this.'

Sometimes we also heard the comment: 'Poor things! Don't shout at them; coax them to go or they will get scared by this angry voice.'

In our moholla there was a person called Maganbhai who had come from Ambasan village. He was known as 'Magan Abahano'. He used to practise black magic, especially on the night of Kali Chaudash. He would put a large pumpkin, on which he had cast a spell, at the crossroad. Many older boys and other adults of the moholla would gather at his house at night. Liquor would be offered as prasad! And many perhaps gathered to partake of this 'chhanto'. On Kali Chaudash and Navratri there would be lot of activities in his house. He often procured jalebis with his black magic for the guests. Ma would stop me from going there by saying, 'It is black magic. Don't you dare go there! And don't ever eat anything there.'

Whatever was the power of black magic it could not pierce Ma's protective talisman.

During Navratri some people believed that a spirit resided in their house and offered food to the spirit. This spirit was believed to protect their house and so if it were not offered food it would get angry. Usually rice would be served with ghee and jaggery, then placed on a tile and offered to Mataji. This would be then distributed among people. After a wedding ceremony in such households the newlywed couple would be asked to pay their homage to Mataji.

One of my teachers used to say, 'There are nothing like ghosts and spirits. These are only our fanciful imagination. There are no ghosts in this world. All these tales are a lie.'

On one Kali Chaudash night I went to him and said, 'Sir, let's visit the cremation ground at midnight.'

He looked at me for sometime and then said, 'Don't be stupid. Go home; we can't take such a risk.'

I could understand his dilemma. I have often visited the cremation ground but never on a Kali Chaudash night. It is believed that on that night the tantriks go there to meditate. There were many tales associated with them. I used to go to the cremation ground to gather wood and cow dung. I would go right up to the place where the corpses were cremated and look in the ashes for the copper coins that were kept on the mouth of the dead person. All around there would be pieces of human bones and sometimes in the monsoon when the body had not burnt out completely and the pyre was extinguished and people had left, the dogs would fight over these pieces of bones. When a woman died, before she was cremated her silken sari was taken off her body and spread on the nearby thorny bushes. Many dalits would carry home this sari. They also brought home the bamboos used to make the bier and used them as fuel. When the bier was taken to the cremation ground ladvos would be offered to the dogs. We would beg for these ladvos from the pallbearers. Usually they never gave us any, saying, 'These are for the dogs.'

But sometimes a kind pallbearer would part with one, which we children would share among ourselves. At the crossroad the bier would be lowered on the ground and the coconut tied to the bier would be broken. We would eat the white portion inside. Whenever I brought the burnt copper coins from the cremation ground Ma would scold me, 'Don't go to the cremation ground. There are ghosts and these ghosts make flares and scare kids. And if some day a spirit were to possess you then you will definitely die.'

In spite of Ma's scolding I continued with my visits to the cremation ground. I've never seen the flares of light caused by the phosphorous from the bones. Perhaps the ghosts feared my presence.

In the past we used to bury the dead. We would carry the body to the lake near P. J. Vakharia High School, dig a pit and bury it. Now a college has come up there, and we have started to cremate our dead in the cremation ground of the higher caste people near the lake. Often when I was at the cremation ground I would listen to the stories of momentary dislike of worldly comforts. Then there were also incidents when the corpse would be burning and

at some distance people would indulge in conversation full of jealousy and backbiting. For some of the dilits, this was a routine matter. They would mechanically come to the cremation ground, smoke their beedi, and sitting at a distance would crack jokes. Then there were some who would spend the time reminiscing about the dead. The moholla people also consoled the relatives who sat there staring at the burning pyre. After the cremation they would go straight to the well or the lake and bathe or at least wash themselves. At the entrance of the moholla they would cover their head with a panchiyu–a short dhoti–and call out 'O...O...O'. The men folk of the moholla would give them water to cleanse their mouth and if there were smallpox in the family they would inhale the smoke of the incense and then enter their house.

I slept on a coir charpoy in the courtyard of our house. Often I felt as if somebody was tightly squeezing my body and beating me up. I could not see the person but felt the pain. Even when I woke up I could not call out for help because no sound would come out. I told this to my Ma and she said, 'May be you had placed your hand on your chest while you were asleep.' But this could not have happened every day and I used to frequently experience this. So far I have no idea what I had experienced. Once I had severe pain in my leg. I told my mother about it. She looked at me for some time and then started to question me. She found out where I had gone to play since morning, which places I had covered, which crossroads I had stopped at and whether there were any offering placed there, and whether I had eaten anything given to me. When she could find nothing unusual she started to question me on my activities of the previous day. I narrated whatever I remembered. When she could find no reason she said: 'You must have put your foot in some circle. Go and pay obeisance to Mataji.'

I had seen my mother remove the effect of the evil eye from my brother. She put lighted coal on a lid and sprinkled salt and chilli powder on it. Then she would invert the lid on a plate. If the lid stuck to the plate she would say, 'Hai, hai! How strong is its evil influence! It's stuck so tightly.' Then she would seal this plate with cow dung so that nobody would be able to remove the lid and place the plate under my brother's cradle.

Once my younger brother was crying and nothing would stop his wails. Ma took some salt and chilli and waved the ingredients seven times over his head and threw it in the fire. When the salt crackled in the fire she said, 'Blind its eyes.' Ma had many such home remedies for her children's well-being.

I remember a woman from the Vaghri moholla coming to our house. She carried a small pipe. I do not remember her name but she was known as 'Punjiya's wife'. She had come to take out wax from Ma's ears. She first poured some oil in her ears, then like a doctor she placed the pipe in it and covered it with a piece of cloth. After this she started to suck the pipe with her mouth. As she sucked the wax started to come out. She removed a lot of wax. How did such a lot of wax gather in her ear? Then to my astonishment when she removed the pipe and blew into it a worm came out along with the wax. She gathered the wax and threw it away. When I asked my mother about this, she replied, 'How can such a small ear have so much wax? I'm sure my bhojai has put an evil eye on me.'

I had looked at her in bewilderment and even today when I think about it I am not able to come up with a convincing explanation. There are many things in life that remain unexplained till the end. On that particular night I wanted my teacher to accompany me to the cremation ground but he had refused. After that I had visited the cremation ground many times but never on the day of Kali Chaudash, and yet I have never been able to get over the terrifying night of Kali Chaudash. For years I have struggled to forget it. I spend the whole year trying to wipe its memory from my mind and when I just about succeed to forget the incident, the day arrives. Tears well up my eyes and there is a deep pain in my heart. On the night of Kali Chaudash, at 12.20 am, Bharti had left me for the other world. I could not go to the cremation ground on Kali Chaudash but the midnight of that day took my wife away from me. Every year when this night comes dark clouds of pain overwhelm my heart and tears flow down from my eyes.

10. Tidings of the Rains

Before the rains came we had to repair the tiles of our roof. All through the year monkeys jumped on the roof, and during Uttarayan the neighbours' children ran along it to catch kites, breaking most of the tiles. We could not reprimand these children because they were from the Rabari colony. There was a strip of land between our house and the adjacent Rabari colony. This space was called naveli, or rather *narvel*–a passage for people to pass through. In reality, this space was kept to avoid any physical contact with us. We used to call it *pashuveli,* because the Rabaris tied their cattle there and also because they had no problems if their cattle came in contact with us. This damaged our wall but we could not say a word about this to the Rabari family for the fear of instigating their wrath. I remember once the old woman of the Rabari family had started to dig a hole in our wall. We had no inkling as to why she was doing this. Ma pleaded with her, begged her for an explanation, but her only response was a volley of curses. Meanwhile the hole was growing bigger. Afraid that the wall would collapse Ma beseeched her, begged her forgiveness for any offence that she had committed unknowingly. After a long time the old woman relented and said, 'Can't you see that water from your roof is falling on my house?'

I was astonished by her explanation because there was no way that water from our roof could fall on her house. There was a wide space between our houses and moreover the eaves of our roof were on the other side so the water fell into our yard. This was as clear as daylight. The real reason was they wanted us to cover the naveli where they tied their cattle because it was open to the sky and when the rains came, the animals got drenched. Finally, to avoid further altercation and to appease them, we had to spend

money to cover the place with a tin roof. We knew that no solution ever emerged fighting over such issues; after all we had to face each other every day! We had learnt to put up with such atrocities from these castes. A Thakore lived at the rear of our house. He had built a wall to prevent any contact with us. But the slope of the land was on his side so the rainwater flowed past his house. Every monsoon he would close the vents in the wall because how could a dalit's water flow past his house? So in the monsoon the rainwater would accumulate in our backyard, which also affected the back wall of the blacksmith who resided there. He was afraid that his wall would collapse and so eventually, when he intervened, the Thakore allowed the water to pass. Nobody was worried about our plight in the matter.

By the time the festival of Uttarayan came the tiles on our roof would be in shambles. I was careful and never flew kites atop the roof. I always kept to the ground. Even when a kite came sailing on the roof Ma would not allow me to go up because she was worried about the tiles. But the Rabari children would chase kites running on our roof, breaking many of the tiles. So before the rains arrived we had to get these tiles replaced. It took two days to replace the broken tiles and we often had to borrow money to do this. Moreover, the person who came to mend the tiles had to be fed and at times when he left the work half-done the roof would leak. Strong winds would shift the tiles and when this happened the cross beam of the roof got exposed and rainwater trickled into the house. During torrential rains, however well the tiles had been placed, leaks would develop. Then we had to place utensils under these leaks. Sometimes the leaks were so many that we would run out of vessels, and there were times when water flowed down in a stream from the beam, completely drenching the earthen plastering of the floor. Sometimes when the water fell on the wall that divided our house from the Rabari colony, it drenched the outer wall of our house and we had to live under the fear of the entire house collapsing because our earthen wall on that side had sunk a little. Whenever a lot of water came inside the house Pitaji would go up in the rains to arrange the tiles properly and when some of these wet tiles broke under his weight, Ma would curse the tile repairer, 'What a shoddy job that diyoro has done! It cannot even prevent

this little water from falling into the house! And imagine he took the full money and on top of it he had to be fed for two days!'

The nights when there was a heavy downpour Ma and Pitaji would keep a vigil and sometimes I would lie awake in their lap and help them arrange vessels under the leaks. This is how we welcomed the rains.

The water poured in not just from the top; it also entered from the yard. Year after year people had piled up earth in front of their houses to raise the ground levels and as a result our house remained at a lower plane. Thus all the water of the area came inside the house. Often in a heavy downpour Pitaji had to take a shovel and dig out a course for water to go out. There were many fights in the moholla over the issue of water courses. When there were incessant rains, the walls of many houses collapsed and at times an entire house would collapse. There would be lot of weeping and laments at such times.

There was no umbrella in the house and so getting drenched in the rain was never a worry for us. I would attend classes and spend the entire day in school in wet clothes. My clothes would eventually dry on my body. Once the monsoon had been very heavy and the lake was in spate. In fact the water had reached the pasture, submerging our well near the lake. We had to fetch water from the well, wading through neck-deep water. Even the womenfolk had to go through this ordeal. Some of the boys from the moholla even swam to the well, holding the water pot and then came back walking.

During the monsoon all kinds of creatures came out of the earth when rainwater entered their burrows. Scorpions and centipedes would move around our houses or hide in some dark corners.

Once Ma, Pitaji and Lakhmankaka were busy talking on the front veranda. They were engrossed discussing all and sundry issues when something fell on Lakhmankaka. He looked up and saw a white band slipping in between the tiles and the rafter. Pitaji and Lakhmankaka knew that it was a snake because the underside of a snake is always white. They immediately got on to the roof and removed all the tiles in that portion, looked into the rafter but they could not locate it. It was as if it had suddenly disappeared.

The land at the back of my house was very soft. Once I was pounding dry ginger in the mortar in my backyard. With the impact of the pounding the mortar gradually started to sink in the ground and almost half the mortar sank into the earth as if the land was hollow; probably there was a snake burrow underneath. Looking at this Ma immediately called out, 'Stop it. There seems to be a snake burrow underneath!'

My grandfather had bought this house from a Rabari. The people of this community refer to snakes as ghoghabapa and worship them. Sometimes one of these ghoghabapas would honour us, instead of the Rabaris, with its presence.

11. Drama

When I was in primary school, competitions of folk dance, ras-garba, during the festival of Navratri, and drama were regularly held in the district primary schools. I do not recall my having any special aptitude for acting but because I was a bright student I would be given a role in the plays. Later as I was growing up I developed an interest in acting. In one of the district-level drama competitions our school had decided to participate, the play was about untouchability and I was given the role of Lakha Bhagat—an untouchable. This play was staged at Lakshmi theatre, which was situated on the banks of a lake in Mehsana. I remember we had rehearsed for the play for many days, and even today I can narrate the dialogue that my friend P. K. Valera had to say when he made his entry on the stage dressed up as a dalit, 'No, no it cannot be my Heer's fault.'

This play had received the first prize in the competition and there were separate prizes for acting as well. The first prize for acting had been given to Leelaben Chauhan, a student of a local girl's school; I was given the second prize, and Chandulal Barot had received the third prize. P. K. Valera had also been given a

prize. We had also received a small brass container for participating in the ras, and I still have that container.

This was the beginning of my interest in drama. Then when I was in the eighth standard I joined P. J. Vakharia High School. Here I was asked to play the main character in a play called *Padho Popatji*. This was the character of a Parsi gentleman called Pestanji. I had to speak in the Parsi Gujarati dialect in which the softer sound of 't' and 'd' are replaced by much sharper sounds. I was able to raise quite a lot of laughter dressed in the attire of a traditional Parsi gentleman, complete with the headgear, and with spectacles slipping down my nose, speaking the peculiar dialect. After this performance everybody in school started addressing me as Pestanji. The girls would call out Padho Popatji whenever they saw me and burst out laughing. Even my principal C. M. Vaidya would smile and say, '*Sojju Bawa sojju*'—well done, Bawa, well done. (Parsis are humorously referred to as Bawa or Bawaji in Gujarati.)

Till I acted in this play, I had never watched any professional plays or spent money on any theatre, not even an amateur play usually put up in the town hall. My only exposure had been the bhavais enacted by the itinerant Turis who visited our moholla. After watching them we children tried to re-enact their performance among ourselves. When I was in the high school I received a lot of accolades for my acting skill but after that I did not make any progress in this field. It all got submerged in trying to perform in the drama of life.

I had a friend in school called Baldev who had a keen interest in drama and cinema. He never took part in any drama but used to dream of becoming a film actor. He would sometimes take me to a movie. Once he told me, 'Come, let's go to Mumbai. We will become film actors and earn a lot of money.' I was tempted by this offer. I knew I was good at acting but what would we do in Mumbai? We did not know anybody there and there was no surety that we would get a chance to act in films immediately. Moreover, I had to think about my parents and my younger siblings. I was well aware of the financial condition of my house. In fact, I did not even have the money for the fare to Mumbai. In the face of this real drama of life I gave up my idea of going to Mumbai.

At that time I was very fond of reading. I spent hours in the library and also read different magazines. Once I had borrowed *Sinhasan Bathrishee* from the library and was reading it, sitting near a window at the back of the house. I was so engrossed in the book that I was unaware of what was happening around me. Ma called me several times and when I did not answer her for a long time she came and snatched the book from my hand, saying, 'Can't you hear me? I have been calling you for a long time. Look at you sitting here with your face in the book. Don't you think you should answer?'

I had not liked Ma taking away the book. I went to her to get my book back when she said, 'Here take this one anna. I have to temper the vegetable.'

I went to the market to get one anna worth of oil. Our moholla was on a higher elevation than the market so we used to refer to the market as *hetal*, meaning down. I hurriedly got her the oil and once again took up the book to read. Seeing this Ma commented, 'What do you read all day? What will you get out of it?'

Once again, I was immersed in *Sinhasan Bathrishee* and I had no time to give an answer. These stories had made a deep impression on my young mind. In every person, whether young or old, there is a childlike interest in stories. When I was small I used to listen with rapt attention to stories that my Ma, Dadi and Pitaji narrated. Sometimes when friends speak of any event I would pay a great deal of attention to what they said. At one time a Gadvi family resided at my kaka's house in the moholla. The man was a talati—village-level officer in charge of collection and keeping account of revenue—and his wife was a good storyteller. They did not have any children and I would often go over to listen to her stories. Often the older girls and daughters-in-law of the moholla would sit around her and listen too. At such times they would ask me to leave. I could not understand why they did not want me there. I wanted to remain and would often insist, but they would tell me, 'Go and play outside. You can't listen to these stories. They are not for you.'

I would be perplexed and did not understand why I could not listen to the stories. Some women would plead with me to go out to play and sometimes somebody would even get angry with me.

Once I reached there when the Gadvi woman was narrating a story, and I refused to leave in spite of their coaxing. Finally, eager to continue with her narration, the woman said: 'Let him be. He's very small, he won't understand anything.'

Then she continued with the story of the princess: 'Then the prince met the girl at the well. He helped her lift the water pot on her head when the stub of his beedi fell into the pot. The girl came home and when she drank water from the pot, unknowingly she swallowed the stub. Very soon she became pregnant.'

After many years I realized that princes never smoke beedis and that the Gadvi woman had used it as a symbol to imply a sexual relationship. Had I not been present then she would have given an open, detailed and interesting description of the prince and the girl's sexual intimacy. Many women would surround the Gadvi woman, eager to listen to her naughty tales. Our traditional tales are full of such symbolic incidents. For example, in the Puranas there is a story about Hanuman in which it is said that when he was flying over the ocean, he had at one point wiped off the sweat from his brow. In doing so a drop of sweat fell into the mouth of a she crocodile residing in the ocean and thus she became pregnant. Perhaps such symbols are used for their aesthetic appeal. Isn't a story of eating a mango associated with the birth of Lord Ram? In all these stories sexual intimacy is never described openly and that is why they do not seem vulgar.

When I was in the primary school I read Dhumketu's *Karanghelo*. Because I loved to read I was able to cultivate an interest in literature at a later stage. Until standard seven I had bought only the prescribed Gujarati Reader; the rest of the books I borrowed from my friends. I had a good memory so I would remember whatever was taught in school. Once when I came first in my class, the class teacher Mafatlal Patel asked me, 'Alya Bhikha, you are busy playing all day. When do you study?'

Mafatlal Patel lived in the Patel colony near our moholla. His back window opened out onto our enclosure where we used to play. Whenever he looked out of his window he found me playing. When I was in the fifth, sixth and seventh standards, my classmate, Harkanth Gandhi, took tuition all through the year and yet he would secure the second rank and I would get the first position in

the class, which did surprise me. I remember till seventh standard I did my homework on a slate that I carried to school, taking care to ensure that nothing got erased while I walked.

I recall an incident when I had visited Harkanth's house. His parents were not at home. After talking for sometime I went inside, right up to his kitchen. In those days untouchability was practised very stringently but Harkanth was my friend and he did not believe in this practice. When I entered the kitchen my eyes fell on the dirty dishes piled up at one corner. There was something there that resembled a piece of bone. I was curious. Did the banias also eat meat? I pointed to that bone like object and asked Harkanth, 'What's that?'

'Pieces of pickled mango seed.' He replied. What I had thought to be pieces of bones were really pieces of mango seed from the pickle. But till then I had not tasted or seen pickle and so I had no idea how the pickled pieces of the seed looked.

Amirbhai's tea stall was near our primary school. He spoke in a nasal voice so we called him Nosy Amir. He sold paan for one paisa but at that time one paisa was as big as a cartwheel for me. It used to be a copper coin with a hole and sometimes Baldev would put his little finger into that hole and offer it to the shopkeeper to buy a paan. He would share a small portion of it with me. Dalit men and women frequented the place. They would squat outside the stall and sip tea. Their cups were kept in a special container and these they had to wash themselves. The image of dalit men and women sipping tea and chatting was a commonplace scenario for me. During the break every day, we passed by this stall whenever we wanted to urinate at the cattle trough that was at a distance. On our way we also spent sometime playing near the new tower clock that had come up in Kalol. We would run around the tower or go in circles. Once some of the boys had gone to relieve themselves and were playing near the tower. On that day I had not gone to school; indeed I had gone to load trucks at the railway yard. The bones brought in the railway wagons had to be loaded in the trucks. After the trucks were loaded, they would pass by the town's main street towards the bone mill. When they passed people held their breath or covered their nose with handkerchiefs to avoid the stench. It was only then that I would realize the overpowering

odour of the bones because I had become accustomed to their smell. Once when I was riding the truck sitting atop the pile of bones the boys saw me. Next day at the school they started to question me, 'Yesterday we saw you on the truck carrying bones. Didn't you feel the stench?'

I had also seen these boys, but I lied, 'It must have been someone else. How would anyone allow me to sit in the truck? I don't know any truck owner that I can hitch a ride with!'

They looked bewildered because they were sure that they had seen me. But how could I explain to them that I had to do this kind of work? If I told them the truth then they would stop being my friends. My unclean work might make them think that I was a destitute and they might even start hating me!

Once Baldev and I were eating ice candy when suddenly a Barot boy came and snatched it from my hands and finished off my half-eaten candy. This boy was known for snatching away any eatables. He never attended any classes and used to spend his time sitting on the veranda of the school. Another time we had gone from school to Veda village to attend a sports meet. Ma had packed sukhadi for me. At night in Veda I found that somebody had finished off the sukhadi. Wasn't the boy who ate the sukhadi afraid of getting polluted at that time? Or did he think it was somebody else's? Our school carried a board that proclaimed children are God's angels. If they are taught such axioms in school then when and how does the poison of casteism get into them? As they grow old? Or are the prevalent customs responsible for its presence in them? And as they grow old and get 'educated' do they start to practise untouchability with renewed interest? To learn this practice they do not have to attend any special school. Their homes are their schools. The way of life at home is generally responsible for their behaviour. I had some friends in whose homes the practice of untouchability was prevalent, but they themselves never believed or behaved in that fashion. It could have been due to the way things were changing.

In 1956 the agitation for Maha Gujarat—the political demand for a separate state of Gujarat—was in full swing. Many political meetings were held on the municipal ground near our school in the Tower Square. One day, while we were in school there was

police firing and one person who lived in the house facing our school was wounded. Later he died. At that time our teacher Madhubhai Barot's younger sister and my classmate in the final year, Hemlata Desai, had participated in this movement and had been arrested. During this agitation Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru came to Ahmedabad to deliver a public address. The Gujarat Janata Parishad decided to oppose the PM's address and so organized a parallel meeting where Indulal Yagnik was going to speak to the public. I remember I went to Ahmedabad to attend Indulal Yagnik's meeting. There was such a traffic jam on the Ellis Bridge that even the footpath on the bridge was blocked with people. We could not cross the bridge on foot. I remember some of my friends and I had climbed the girders to cross it. When I had looked down I was able see the Sabarmati flowing and had felt dizzy. And yet surprisingly I do not think I was at all scared of falling into the river. Today I can laugh at my foolishness and I know I would not be able to muster such courage now. It had been possible because we were young, there was an euphoria about Indulal Yagnik and we were keen to listen to him rather than to Nehru. In Kalol too the movement had been in full force. I had the opportunity to listen to many speakers at the Tower Square. At times the police used to issue the order of lathi charge and sometimes even firing. I would then run back home. There was a scare about 303 bullet firings. Ma used to be very apprehensive whenever I went to attend such meetings.

Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's movement, a Scheduled Caste Federation had been started in the moholla, and now every single child talked about Dr. Ambedkar. A library had been set up and the children of the economically backward families were provided old textbooks from the book bank. I taught maths, tables and spellings to weaker students. I did not have a proper blackboard to write on and I used the tin sheet that covered one of the windows of my house as a writing board. It was a time to learn and teach. Parshottambhai Maganbhai Parmar, a resident of the moholla, was a labourer in a mill but he worked hard and passed his matriculation examination as an external candidate. He then applied and got the job of a goods clerk in the Railways. The office of the Scheduled Caste Federation was located in my kaka's house, and every evening

the youths would gather to discuss various issues. The office also conducted classes to teach them the art of wielding staff. It also had other tools for exercising. There was a new awakening in the moholla and a spirit of harmony prevailed.

Once Dr. Ambedkar had planned to visit our moholla. It was decided that he would stay at my kaka's house. A great deal of preparation was underway to welcome him. For some reason he could not come but his other associates did. I remember Shantaben Dani had come from Mumbai. I recall the violent opposition that the people of the moholla had to face when they attempted to enter the tea stall owned by a Patel, situated at the entrance of our moholla. This happened right before my eyes. Perhaps this was the first incident in Gujarat of entry of the dalits in a higher caste tea stall. I remember when the news of fisticuffs had reached Shantaben, she had picked up the bundle of staffs from the third floor of the Federation office and thrown it down on the street. It fell on somebody's feet and he was hurt. The youths of the moholla then picked up these staffs and went out to fight for their rights. The police came and the stall had to be sealed up. After this incident, gradually the practice of untouchability started to wane. An agitation on buses was also undertaken as dalits were not allowed to ride buses. In this agitation many dalits were injured and though there were many hurdles the agitation continued. In the mills the dalits had separate arrangement for tea and drinking water. There was violent opposition against this practice. Very often there were fights between the two groups in the Navjeevan Mills. My brother-in-law Somabhai Parmar had been injured in such an encounter.

We were not allowed to play the drums during auspicious occasions in the moholla. At Diwali we would sing and dance the garba around the Mother Goddess without the sound of the drum. Then during one Diwali people started to play the drum. Stones were pelted in the moholla but the drumbeats continued. The Patels, Rabaris and Thakores showered curses on us whenever we went out of the moholla. Though there were fear and anxiety on the faces of the singers and dancers, the beating of the drum did not stop. Then for quite sometime we could not play the drum outside the moholla. So when the garbo was taken out on the Bhai Beej to the shrine of the Mother Goddess near Payaga School we did not play the drum while passing the Rabari,

Thakore and the Raval colonies. Then one Diwali it was decided in the moholla that the drum would be played while taking the garbo to the shrine. The people of the moholla were well armed for the consequence. The youths were prepared to face any violence on the way. I saw my elder brother hiding a dagger in his waist. He also carried a thin stick in his hand. This stick was really a shield that hid a long thin sword. Fully armed, the procession left the moholla playing the drum. Everybody expected an attack but nothing happened. Perhaps the others were scared of inviting the wrath of the Mother Goddess on them! Thereafter every year the procession of the garbo was taken out with great pomp and show to the shrine. When the procession would reach the middle of the town at Tower Square, the garbo would be placed on the ground and people would dance and sing to the loud beat of the drum. The entire dalit population of Kalol would gather there on that day.

There was a different kind of restlessness and enthusiasm among the youth in those times. It was the impact of Babasaheb Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation. There was a great unity among the dalit youths who worked in different mills in Kalol. The youths of my moholla who worked in the mills had put up a play called *Siddhartha* at the Vishnu Theatre which was in the middle of the town. The cast was entirely of dalit workers. Mr. Tapodhan, a dalit mill worker, had composed the music of the play, and Himmatsinh Vaghela had written the lyrics. These songs had become so popular that even small children like me had learnt them by heart. I knew all the songs of the play and even today after forty years I remember many of the stanzas:

> *'Char divasni chandni ne ghor andhari raat,*
> *Mrutyu jhalar rumjhum baje payalno ranakar*
> *Chet have tu uuth nahi to palma nash thanar*
> *Taara jeevanna din chaar.'*
> ('Four days of moonlight and then deep dark night
> Death's bell sounds in the tinkling of anklets.
> Awake and arise to avert destruction,
> For your life has just four days . . .')

Himmatsinh Vaghela appeared for his IAS examination. He was a dalit but he married a brahmin girl. His wedding reception was held at our moholla and everybody welcomed them with great warmth and love. At that time the famous singer Maheshbhai Kanodia was a rising artist. He used to sing in both male and female voice and would win the hearts of all the listeners present. He performed in our moholla and in the chawls of Navjeevan mills. Many upper caste people came to the dalit moholla to listen to him. Savitaben Kolasawala, who has become an important entrepreneur, was just starting her business then and her rise in the business has been meteoric thereafter. Dr. Ambedkar brought about a new dawn for the dalits. It was a time of awakening, a new consciousness, and a gradual realization of one's rights—a beginning of a nation-wide movement where there were no violent encounters, no bomb bursting or destruction of rail lines; there was only a strong determination to achieve one's rights even if it meant being beaten up for it.

On one Navratri festival some of us passed by the garbo as that had been placed in the town square by the caste people, on the middle of the road so we had to cross it. But the higher caste people did not like our being anywhere near their garbo. Suddenly a group of people attacked us. We were unarmed, as we were not prepared for this attack. Somebody wielded a staff with great force and hit me on my right arm. I was very small at that time and did not have the strength to withstand the blow. My hand was completely numb. I have not been able to forget this blow ever. It was as if I was being prepared for the real life battle. The only difference was in this play the hero was beaten up and the villain enjoyed watching his plight. In a sense both the plays, in which I had acted in my school, turned out to be symbolic. The first play, *The Golden Sun*, was about the abolition of untouchability and the second play, *Padho Popatji*, was also related to the life in this country. The promised golden sun has yet to rise in this country. Is that why perhaps the dalit poets took out a magazine called *Black Sun*? In this country we learn many things by rote like a parrot—that children are angels of God; the world is one family. The reality is so different from what is being taught. People's conduct in real life is just the opposite. What country is this where an entire section of society is denied *even* the

status of being human beings, and it preaches global friendship! Perhaps that is why I was destined to act in those two plays. What an irony of fate!

12. Dadima's Miracle

My dadima was a good-hearted person. Her name was Kanku, meaning sindur or vermillion. This vermillion powder has a great significance in our religion. It is considered to be very holy. At any auspicious function a mark of kanku is put on the forehead. Dadima too was very religious and devout. My grandfather had been a leader of our community. He was known in the community as 'Ranchodwala' and greatly respected by the people. He was a just, loyal and straightforward person. During his times the family had been very prosperous. My dadi would tell us how in those days silver coins bearing Queen Victoria's impression used to be counted by the bowlful. We hosted many community dinners in the house. We were known for our hospitality. And Dadi used to say it was all because of the presence of Goddess Mahakali in the house.

She was a very meticulous and hardworking person. She would get up at three or four in the morning and sit down at the hand mill to grind the grain for the day. It was a prosperous household in the community so there was a continuous flow of houseguests. If any person happened to come at mealtime he could not leave without partaking food. To provide for so many people Dadi had to grind a lot at the hand mill because electric grinding mills did not exist then.

I remember an incident that Dadi had told me. One day very early in the morning she sat down to grind. She had been engrossed in turning the handle of the grinding stone when a woman came and sat facing her. She was so busy working, lost in the steady movement of the stone that she did not realize this woman's presence. Suddenly that woman asked her, 'Kanku, do you recognize me?'

'No . . .'

The woman replied, 'I'm Kalika.'

Dadi screamed and the woman vanished from her sight.

I helped Dadi with her various chores. At night before she went to bed I would shake her thin mattress and spread it properly on the cot. We never used a sheet to cover the mattress. This was done only for important guests, especially the fathers-in-law of sons or daughters. The cot would then be put in the yard and the thin mattress would be neatly covered with a sheet. Once I washed Dadi's clothes and it pleased her a great deal. Our neighbour Ramima happened to be present and had commented, 'If you serve the elders in this fashion you will be blessed.'

Dadi had praised me a lot when my father returned home from work:

'Shiva, your Bhikha is such a good lad. He washed my clothes in spite of his mother and me asking him not to do so.'

Dadi used to address my father by his name. He was very pleased to hear this and replied:

'Kanku bless this child.'

He too called Dadi by her name.

Dadi's blessings have always been with me. I also recall how I was fortunate to be blessed by one of the sisters-in-law of the moholla. Dadi's experience at the hand mill reminds me of another incident of my childhood. At that time though there were electric flour mills in the town many women in the moholla insisted on using the hand mill at home for various reason, one of which was untouchability; second was to avoid unnecessary expenditure; and third was because the mill operator would keep a part of the flour. The elderly women would invariably grind at home but sometimes some of the mothers-in-law insisted that the daughters-in-law should also do so. The daughters-in-law who were from the villages had no difficulty in doing so but those who came from cities and towns often found operating the hand mill a tough job. One of my sisters-in-law was from the city. One day she called me, looking out of the back window of the house. I was taken aback. Why did she call me? What work did she have? I climbed inside the house from the back window. She was very sweet to me and then very quietly she passed on a tin can of grain and gave me one anna to spend. She smiled and said:

'You'll have to do this work for me. Please go to the mill and get this grain ground. You're my very dear brother-in-law. But don't let anyone know about this.'

I was going to get an anna for this job, so why would I refuse? I picked up the can and went to the mill. I got the grain ground and came back and gave her the can of flour from the back window. She was absolutely thrilled. She overturned the flour from the can into the basin of the grinding mill. I was stunned. After the entire flour was in the basin she started to chat with me. I too loved to chat with her because she had a smart way of talking, being city-bred. Then suddenly we heard her mother-in-law approach. Immediately she sat at the grinding mill and pretended to grind. The mother-in-law came in and found her daughter-in-law busy at the hand mill. She was very pleased to see that she had almost finished grinding and that too at such a short time. She came out into the courtyard and told her neighbour: 'Though my daughter-in-law is from the city she is well versed in household work. She does all the housework. While I was out to get vegetables, she finished grinding almost five seers [approx 4.60kg] of grain.'

The neighbour commented: 'Muri, you're very fortunate.'

Only Bhabhi and I knew the truth.

During my college days I wrote a short story based on this incident. It was called 'A City-Bred Daughter-in-Law' and was published in a weekly called *Stree*.

13. Motiben

When I was small I used to play a great deal with my elder sister, Motiben. Her name was Shantabehen but she was called Shanti at home. Sometimes we used to play on the loft where wood used to be stored. Our plaything was that wooden doll. There was no ladder to go up the loft. We had to climb the ledge where water pots used to be kept and then place one foot into a niche in the wall and get into the loft. It was dark inside and a trickle of sunlight used to filter through the gap between the broken tiles and the rafter.

When Motiben got married I was very small. Ma had told me: 'You know that Jhenabhai had specially made a pair of slippers with two hundred and fifty sequins for your sister.'

Ours was a prestigious family in the community and our financial condition had also been good at that time. My sister had been given a very expensive sari. I do not remember clearly the time of Motiben's send off to her in-law's house, which used to be a sad occasion—our parents, relatives and all the moholla people would gather to bid her a tearful goodbye. In the same way the scene at the time of a daughter's first aanu—when she would be sent off permanently to her in-law's house—also used to be tear-laden. After Motiben, my cousin Jadi got married. At the time of her send off the atmosphere had become very heavy and when I saw everybody weeping I too had broken down. Another parting scene, which I have never been able to forget, happened at my wedding when my wife was parting from her family. The entire moholla had gathered to bid her goodbye. I could see that her friends were sobbing uncontrollably. Along with them were other women of the moholla and her aunt. Looking at them I had wondered what would be the state of my mother-in-law. She too was crying and other women

were trying to console her. Then suddenly there was quite a bustle. Somebody went to get water, and some went to get a fan. Somebody was heard saying: 'Let in some air.'

'Alya, quick, please get some water.'

'Where's that Moti? Has she brought any water? Sprinkle some on her eyes. She'll gain consciousness soon.'

I later came to know that it was my mother-in-law who had fainted while bidding her daughter goodbye. My wife was her first child and so she had been raised with lot of love and care. After her birth their financial condition had improved. I remembered the scene of Shakuntala's farewell from the play *Shakuntal*, which I had studied while I was doing my M.A. But the sorrow of Sage Kanva, Mother Gautami and Shakuntala's friends Priyamvada and others paled in comparison to this sorrow. That was literature based on imagination whereas this was reality that I experienced. I witnessed Shakuntala's farewell being enacted right in front of my eyes.

Motiben had gone on many pilgrimages. She had been to Haridvar and to the banks of the Narmada. She had circumambulated Mount Girnar two times. Both my sister and brother-in-law were very pious. Many years ago, when I was in the eighth standard they had taken me to Mount Abu. That was my first visit to Abu. Valdas Maharaj, a disciple of Dungarpuri Maharaj of Amirgadh, had accompanied us to help my sister and brother-in-law with religious ceremonies. He was well versed in spiritual knowledge. On our way we had stopped at Amirgadh to visit Dungarpuri Maharaj's holy fire and shrine. We paid obeisance at the holy fire, marked our forehead with holy ash and then left for Abu. At Abu we had stayed at the Gora Sapra Ashram of Ramdas Sadhu. I suddenly could not see, as if I had lost my night vision. Then I had a vision of a saffron coloured Lord Hanuman. I have not been able to unravel the mystery of this vision even today. When we returned after four days I got back my full vision. Since that day Lord Hanuman seems to have been with me whereever I went. When I was posted in Dholka I lived in the Mahalakshmi Pol. Ramanlal Patel, an MBBS doctor and a municipal councillor, resided in my neighbourhood, just three houses from mine. One evening he took me to his house. They had cooked khichri and when he showed me the pot in which the khichri had been kept I

found it had a saffron hue. In his house he had a special place of worship for Lord Hanuman. He showed me the image there and said: 'This is the child Hanuman.'

Then when I was at Himmatnagar I had a vision of Lord Hanuman with a halo in my dream. So though I have not worshiped Lord Hanuman; he has been either with me or near me; maybe because as a child I would regularly make an offering of oil and sindur at his feet.

My first visit to Amirgadh had been with Motiben some thirty years ago. The next visit was when I had a job and was posted to Palanpur. Then when I was posted at Gandhinagar, I took Motiben to Amirgadh. The holy fire that we had seen thirty years ago was still burning. Now a large temple has come up there. While talking to the present mahant of the temple we came to know that he used to work at a mill in Ahmedabad. The people of Amirgadh had brought him there to be in charge of the temple. My sister's happiness knew no bounds when she visited the temple after thirty years. A room had been built around the holy fire of Dungarpuri Maharaj. There were many tales of miracles associated with his name. This Dungarpuri Maharaj was a dalit.

Many years ago when my sister was newly married she had some tiff with her parents-in-law and had come home in a huff. Ma had listened to her complaint patiently and told my father when he returned from work. They talked among themselves and then Pitaji coaxed Motiben to return to her home. When she refused to do so he told her bluntly: 'Go back this instant to your home. Remember now your parents-in-law's house is your house.'

Motiben had truly expected that Ma and Pitaji would take her side and scold her husband and his parents but instead they had let her down. She went back in tears. Ma had seen her tears and Pitaji too was aware of her state of mind, but they did not give in. Ma wept after Motiben had left and told Pitaji: 'Why can't that Somo [my brother-in-law] leave her alone? Why does he harass her so much?'

To which Pitaji had replied: 'Our daughter is not a small child anymore. She has to learn to manage her house.'

After this event Motiben never came to our house after a quarrel with anyone in her house. My brother-in-law and she would visit us on special occasions or festivals, but they always came as a happy couple. On such occasions she would be given a sari and even

utensils. Once we gave her a brass water pot. At a later stage they moved from their village Kherpur and settled in Kalol. In the beginning, in Kalol they stayed in Rama Bhagat's chawl and both worked in the Navjeevan Mill. Whenever I visited them in the chawl, their neighbours would give me a warm welcome. As soon as I entered the chawl the boys would run to my sister, calling out, 'Shanti's brother has come.' They earned well in the mill and lived a frugal life. My brother-in-law always wore khadi clothes and was active in community activities. Gradually with great care they were able to save enough to buy a proper house in the Labour Housing Society. This was the first housing society of the dalits in Kalol where all the houses were of brick and mortar. They had to pay a total of Rs.1600 to become a member of the society and own a house. But in those days in order to pay this amount my sister and brother-in-law had to really toil very hard. They succeeded in educating their children well. Their son is an engineer in Ahmedabad and their three daughters are all married.

Initially, when they had come to Kalol, sometimes Motiben would come to the moholla after her job in the mill. Ma and Motiben would then talk and laugh and have a good time. One evening after dinner they were busy chatting, unmindful of the dishes that had to be washed. I went out with the dishes and in a short time cleaned them and came back. Motiben was quite surprised to see me do the work so fast and so well. She at once commented: 'How did you manage to wash all these dishes even before I could come to help you? Well done!' Ma too praised me and then she made me sit next to her and said: 'What a good boy!'

The incident of Motiben's tiff with her parents-in-law reminds me of another incident that had happened with my wife. Both reveal how parents can show the right path to their children through proper guidance. What if my parents had got swayed by my sister's tears and had gone to fight with her in-laws? Things would have gone out of control and the outcome would have been very different. In the initial period of my married life once I had quarrelled with my wife. We then lived in Kubernagar Society, right opposite Nadiad Railway Station. I slapped my wife so hard in anger that there were impressions of my fingers on her cheek. In

a huff she left me and went to her father's house. Around twelve at night I received a phone call at my office from her uncle, 'Has Bharti come there?'

I told him that she had not, and he did not say anything. When I came back home after finishing my work at the office I saw a faint light from inside my house. I was surprised. I had the key so I wondered who would have opened the door. When I entered I found Bharti waiting for me. She did not have a key so she had broken the lock and entered the house. I could not control my laughter when I saw her and said: 'Your uncle had called a little while ago. When did you arrive?'

Without uttering a word she closed the door and then suddenly she held my hands and said: 'I'll never go away.'

I gave her a glass of water and then that night we talked till late hours. She told me what had happened. 'When I reached home Lakho [her younger brother] saw the marks on my cheek and started to tease me by saying: "Look what a tight slap my brother-in-law has given her!" He laughed and showed it to others. My parents joined him. My uncle too reprimanded me saying, "Such things happen in marriage." I found that nobody was taking my side. Instead of scolding you everybody started accusing me saying: "Why did you come here in a huff?" Even the neighbours joined my parents in accusing me. I was so angry that I left that place without telling anyone and came back here. They must be now worried about me and so they telephoned you.'

I recalled how after our marriage at the time of seeing the daughter off my mother-in-law had fainted. But even so she did not take her side. After this incident my wife never went back to her parents in a huff. On festive occasions I often went to my parents-in-law's house but nobody ever discussed or even mentioned that incident. I want to write more about our marriage in a separate chapter but at this point I want to note that though my wife had studied only up to the third standard she faced no problem associating with other IAS officers' wives in the club. She had even attended dinner parties given by Sharada Mukerjee, the governor of Gujarat. People often spoke of our happy married life as an example to others.

After many years of marriage, my wife would burst out laughing, recalling her brother Lakhman's comment, 'What a tight slap my brother-in-law gave you!' Her laughter reflected pure happiness that a happy marriage had provided. I too often remember her statement, 'I'll never ever leave you.'

And yet she left me forever half-way through our journey of life.

14. Bhavai

We would wait for the arrival of the Turis to the moholla to perform bhavai. The sound of their bugle and loud call of '*Khamma mara vaghela, khamma mara jadavda*' as they entered the moholla would make us overjoyed. A bhavai was performed in the middle of the moholla, and we would gather there much before the performance started. There would be fights among the children over reserving their place in the first row. In winter I too would carry a sheet to protect myself from cold and at times if the other boys did not have anything to cover themselves two to three boys would share one sheet. When we had to pee we would ask our companions to keep our place. At times many of the boys afraid of the darkness in the naveli would suppress their desire and sometimes some of the boys unable to hold any longer would wet their pants. We had fun teasing such boys. An *aarti* or worship with lamps would be performed before the bhavai could start and in the intermission there would be songs. There would be an auction to collect funds for the aarti and till a certain amount of money was collected the aarti would continue. Sometimes there would be competition in raising funds and at such times the performers got a good amount. There was even competition in announcing a sum to stop the intermission songs. In this event the castes supposedly higher than us would join and would feel mighty pleased when they were able to do away with the songs.

Sometimes it would lead to a serious fight. When the competition to stop songs continued till early morning the Turis would intervene saying, *'khamma, khamma'*. When this went on we children would stretch ourselves and inquire solicitously, 'How are you, Ramanbhai, do you want me to get you beedis?' and get behind the curtain. There we would find Lord Hanuman or Goddess Sita puffing beedis, somebody getting his makeup fixed or rearranging his hair.

Once I saw Sita sharing a beedi with Ram. I saw a different bhavai being enacted behind the screen. Sometimes when the play was at a thrilling climax the gas lamp would blow off. At such times Lord Hanuman would immediately take down the lamp and work vigorously at the pump. Once the lamp started to function he would resume his dialogue. At times even Goddess Sita would get down to play the harmonium. The bhavai would go on till late night, and many boys would go off to sleep and we would wake them up when the play was over or call their mothers. Next day we would follow the person who had played the role of Hanuman and try to look in vain for his tail. He would make us laugh by blowing his cheeks like Hanuman.

There were other bhavais that were being constantly enacted in the moholla. There were at times serious fights among family members, but whatever the misunderstandings during the year, on New Year's Day everyone would meet and ask for forgiveness. Everyone would visit each other's house, those who were young would touch the elders' feet, and children would put on new clothes and go in groups wishing everyone 'Jai Prabhu' or 'Jai Shri Krishna'. The younger daughters-in-law would pay obeisance to the elders. On that day everybody would forget whatever enmity they had during the year and greet each with 'forgive all our misdeeds'.

Whenever there was a marriage in the moholla we had a function of songs for ten days before the wedding. We children would have a lot of fun at that time. After the first session of singing was over, the host would generously distribute first dates, then patasa—sugar candies—and finally jaggery. We collected all these goodies. These were given to each member of the family and if there were extra sugar candies Ma would keep these aside and use with jaggery to

sweeten the tea for special guests. Some woman, who was not directly related to the host family, usually distributed these goodies. Sometimes when these were given out in a handful the host would draw the attention of the one who was distributing by saying: 'When you have a function in your house, remember how we had distributed the goodies. I remember how from a certain person we had received just five sugar candies.'

Some elderly woman from the family would comment: 'My goodness, just see how you are distributing! Do you want to rob us completely?'

The person distributing would get angry and then she would bang the plate and walk off in a huff:

'Then why don't you distribute? If you give out one extra lump of jaggery will you become poor? After all, it is a festive occasion and people have some expectations, don't they?'

She would then be coaxed to resume distribution and the elderly woman would again comment:

'Why do you feel so offended? You also know very well that we have not received even a lump of jaggery from their house.'

That woman would laugh and start distributing once again.At the time of the wedding the entire moholla gathered at the house of the family where the wedding was going to be held. There would be bundles of beedi and matchboxes. The place would be filled with beedi and chillum smoke.If a family member was offended for some reason then others would coax him and if he still refused to come then the moholla people went to pacify him:

'Bhai, we are only the moholla people so you may treat us as outsiders, but he is your blood relation. Don't let this come between the two of you otherwise this stain will never be erased.'

Then that relative would come and join the gathering. He would take out his anger by saying: 'It was all because of that Amtho—that boy who still has his turd hanging from his arse—said that it was fine if I didn't attend the wedding. Tell me why should I then come here?'

'Alya bhai, he is still immature. You shouldn't take him seriously.'

'In that case his mother should have had a say, isn't it?'

Once again the moholla people would intervene and pacify both the sides. Gradually things would fall in place and the wedding rites would be performed. We, of course, waited eagerly for the time of the distribution of jaggery. Right from my childhood I listened to all conversations that took place during such occasions. The priest also narrated stories while performing the rituals. He explained the virtue of charity by giving the example of the great philanthropist Karna.

Whenever there was a wedding of a young man in the moholla, the entire population had to be invited to the bride's house. The family members of the groom would ensure that nobody was left out. Somebody would comment at such times: 'Alya bhai, I don't see Devo anywhere.'

His brother would reply: 'He had to go to the doctor. He asked me to tell you that you should not wait for him.'

Then another would quip: 'Where's Punjeeyo? He's not to be seen.'

Punjeeya's son would answer: 'My mama came to call my bapa so he has gone to the hetal. He'll be back soon.'

'Well all right. At least you are around.'

'Will somebody go and call Bubo? He's still not come.'

The master of the house would reply:

'I sent my son twice to call him.'

'Send him one more time. Where's Ramaniyo? Be a good boy and run fast!

Ramaniyo would go for the third time to call Bababhai. He would then come muttering: 'Why does he only send his son to call me? Why can't he come personally? Is he a big lord or what?'

This way the moholla people would be collected. Then somebody from the group would ask the guardian of the groom: 'Now tell us, Shakrabhai, why have you called us here?'

Raman would be quick to reply: 'You know very well why you have been called.'

'Yes we do know why we have been called. But the host would have to formally tell us why he has called us.'

The host could be either the father or the uncle of the groom. He would then say: 'We have to take the *jaan* [groom's party] of Kanu to the bride's house.'

One of the persons gathered there would say: 'Well now we know the reason. Now take out the money for *dapa*.'

A family member was given the responsibility for the collection of the dapa. He placed the plate in the middle of the gathering. This plate would go around the group. Someone responsible would count the money and then the amount would be distributed among the male relatives of the groom—brother-in-law, Mama, Kaka, and so on. After the wedding at the bride's place when the jaan is seated on a mattress, each member takes out the money and the bride's father is paid the dapa. Only after this ritual is over can things proceed. At such times somebody would comment, 'Well the ritual of the dapa is over. Now according to the new agreement nothing more has to be given. Come now, if you brothers have any other settlements to be done then finish it.'

If at an earlier occasion somebody had lent any money, this would be settled at this point. This kind of transaction would be generally between bridegroom's father and his uncles. Then somebody in the group would say, 'Alya, has anyone asked for the *whitie*?'

Immediately a packet of Cavender's brand of cigarettes would be brought and put in the middle. In no time the packet would be used up. With this tea would be served in saucers. Once all the rituals were over one of the persons would say: 'Now bring the plate of jaggery.'

A big plate full of jaggery would be brought out and distributed by one of the members of the family. People would then leave carrying a piece of jaggery. We children used to scramble for it.

Once the jaan was back at the bridegroom's house, thothas—boiled whole grains of wheat—were distributed. Next day the bride and the groom went round the moholla to pay obeisance to all the elders. In every house the groom would bow down to elders in the family and offer them pieces of coconut. The bride followed him with her sister-in-law. She would hold her pallu before the elders. If there were any aged woman in the family she would press her feet. The children would accompany the newly weds on their rounds of the moholla. The bride and the groom in this way were initiated into the game of life.

15. In the Cotter Mill

Ma worked in the yarn section in the 'cotter' mill. The word 'cotton' had got corrupted to 'cotter' and so everybody in the moholla and those who lived in chawls referred to the mill as 'cotter mill'. The mill was at some distance from the moholla and so the women who worked in the mill had to get up very early in the morning, cook lunch and carry tiffin boxes. Those who had older children or daughters-in-law would just wash and eat a leftover rotlo with tea, and leave for the mill. Later in the day, their son or daughter or daughter-in-law would carry lunch to the mill. They would either leave the tiffin box or wait till the lunch was over and bring back the empty box. While they were in the mill they helped in the work and learnt the job. Some women left behind their small children at home and so during the lunch break these children had to be carried to the mill to be fed. Ma used to carry her lunch and then around 10 o'clock I would bring my younger brother to the mill so that she could breastfeed him. I stayed there till two o'clock and looked after him. There were other kids there and I played with them. Later a crèche was started, so I waited there with my brother till my mother came to feed him. A Christian woman used to be in charge of the crèche and I remember she was very affectionate towards me. I would carry my brother on my waist and walk this long distance every day. Blisters formed on my waist which in turn left dark patches on the skin.

While we were in the mill we collected empty bobbins to play with them. The bobbins were collected in wicker baskets which were very light. The labourers carried these baskets on their head and ran energetically. We used to upturn these

baskets and use them as chairs. I would make my brother sit on one of the baskets and play with him. Ma manually operated the reeling machine, filled the spool of waste yarn and cut the waste yarn. I used to help her in cutting these yarns and sometimes even operated the reeling machine. My hands would ache operating the machine. But Ma laboured all day in the mill and came home in the evening and did all the household chores. The division head came on rounds to the section. We would usually come to know when he was going to come on his rounds. At such times there would be quite a bustle in the section. Women who were suckling their children would wean them from their breasts and push them out of the section. And if a woman was caught breastfeeding her child then, more than the officer, the mukkaddam showed his importance. 'How many times have I told them not to bring children inside the section but nothing seems to get into their heads. How many times must one tell them?'

After the officer left the section, the mukkaddam would return and again throw his weight around and drink tea at their cost. 'Mukkaddam' was a difficult word to pronounce so everybody called him 'mukardam.'

Those in the moholla who did not work in the mill and stayed at home collected thikra, which were broken pieces of deshi nalia—mud-baked roof tiles—used in masonry work. If a person was getting a house built he would come to the moholla to ask for baskets of thikras. We were always on the lookout and whenever a potential buyer approached the moholla we would run carrying the baskets on our heads. The first to reach got to sell the thikras. Once the required number of baskets was taken the rest had to return home carrying their unsold wares. The price for one basket of thikra varied from two annas to three annas. We collected these thikras from streams, garbage dump, dung-heap, and so on. If a house was being repaired we would go there to collect the discarded tiles. We collected broken pieces of earthen pots, *vilayati* nalias (called thus because of their shape) and even pieces of huge earthen water jars and mixed them with the thikras of the mud-baked tiles. These nalias fetched a higher price and were considered to be of a better

quality. We got half an anna more for them. We had to hard sell our goods so we would draw attention to them by praising our goods:

'Come see, only unadulterated *deshi nalia thikras*. Nothing has been mixed in it!'

There were squabbles over thikras. Those who came back with unsold thikras cursed those who managed to sell their goods. We were very often the target of these curses because our house was at the entrance of the moholla so when anyone came to collect the thikras I would be the first person to know about it. I would run with my basket first and our goods always got sold. The others who had to return without selling their thikras would grumble that I would never let anyone else get a chance.

I also collected pieces of bones. Both Pitaji and Ma disapproved of my collecting thikras and bones. But Ma did not object because the two or three annas that I got selling a basket of thikras at least helped her to procure dal and vegetables for the family. But Pitaji disapproved of 'Shiva Contrati's son' engaging in such a lowly job of collecting bone pieces. It marred his reputation and position in the society but was there any other option? Merely recalling past position and honour was not going to fill our bellies! At a very young age I learnt this valuable lesson. So I have never ever felt ashamed to do any manual work. However, I stopped collecting bones when I realized how deeply it humiliated Pitaji. He never objected to my collecting thikras so I continued with that work.

The elderly women of the moholla took their baths in the afternoon. They would put the charpoy upright and spread a sari on it and create a partition. Sometimes even young women when they were not well sat down to bathe in this fashion. One had to be very careful about the sari not getting blown away in the wind. When that happened the poor woman would crouch trying to hide her breasts and call out to the children playing around to get back the sari and place it on the charpoy. She would then hurriedly cover herself with it, but not before she was subjected to such comments from her

family: 'What a stupid creature!' Or 'No sense at all!'

Generally, little girls were asked to guard the sari and if there were no girls around some of us—the little boys—were asked to be on guard. The men of the moholla—those who worked in the mill—came home in the evening and immediately filled a bucket and sat on the lehni to bathe. Motabhai bathed on the lehni near the chenthia. Pitaji used to have his bath in the mill. The rest of us would bathe in the kitchen in the chokdi—the corner where waste water drains out near the paniyara—a place where earthen pots containing drinking water were kept. A deep pit had been dug for the waste water to accumulate. After our bath we would draw water from this pit in a bucket and throw it out. Ma and Bhabhi bathed inside and whenever I had a cold or a fever I too had my bath inside. The rest of the time Ma bathed me on the lehni outside. After I grew up I always bathed on the lehni. However, whenever I went to fetch water from the well, I bathed at the well side. The women generally bathed at night, hurriedly pouring a lota or two of water over themselves.

School, sundry jobs at home and play left very little time for extra reading during the day so I used to study at night. We did not have electricity at our house so I studied by the light of a kerosene lamp. Up to my MA, I studied by the light of the kerosene lamp at home. Sometimes I went to the railway station and sat on one of the benches and studied. Once a railway official came and sat beside me. He started to question me about my name, where I lived, and when he came to know that I was from the dalit moholla he started making dirty passes at me. I at once guessed his intention but I decided to act with caution. I realized that if I walked off straightaway, he would be offended and could book me for entering the station without a ticket. Instead, I got up saying I was thirsty. I walked to the drinking water tap, drank water and left the station and reached home. After this incident I avoided going to the railway station for a month. Then I started to read under street lights. During my matriculation examination I went to my friend Moiuddin's house to study. I used to study right through the night.

Sometimes Moiuddin's Amma or his father would come at two or three at night to check our progress, and when they found their son fast asleep and saw me studying they would smile at me and leave. Moiuddin had a tutor to teach him. He had a big house and a large family. They were very rich but everybody in the house was very warm towards me. I had become almost a part of his family. I would study all night and come home at around five in the morning.

The Hindi movie *Nagin* with Vaijayantimala and Pradip Kumar in the lead roles had become very popular at that time. Its songs had caught everyone's fancy. The tune of the *been*—a wind instrument that had been played in the movie—could be heard at restaurants and shops in the market. At school we would pucker our lips to recreate the been music to the beat of the tapping on the bench. In the moholla I would do it to the accompaniment of the beat of tapping on the flour canister that we used as a drum, and my friend Bababhai would dance to the tune. Sometimes Bababhai would recreate the music and play the flour canister and I would dance. We enjoyed dancing, especially after watching Gopikrishna's dance in the movie *Janak Janak Payal Baje*. Around this time the older boys of the moholla put up the play *Yayati* where a boy gave a fine dance recital. Bababhai and I would often dance in our house behind closed doors. Bababhai of course was a better dancer. During wedding festivities the young boys and girls danced the hench, a folk dance, where there is keen competition between the dancer and the drummer and in the course of dancing either the drummer would give up or the dancer would be tired out. It is a very virile dance and only those with a good physique were able to dance. During weddings, this dance would go on till late hours and everybody had a good time. When the daughters and daughters-in-law danced the hench, the entire moholla seemed to sway in its rhythm. People would coax a good hench dancer to perform and if the person showed any reluctance then somebody would be bound to comment, 'Stop being so high and mighty,' or: 'This is your age to dance. Later nobody would even ask you to dance.'

The Vaghri Vas was located just behind our moholla. We enjoyed watching their hench even more. They were more expressive in

their dance—they would sometimes make faces, smacking sounds, or signs to make us laugh.

Once my younger brother was very hungry and he started to cry. I was meant to have taken him to my mother in the mill for his feed. But I was so busy playing that I did not realize how late it was. Our neighbour Rami Doshi saw my brother crying and she remarked, 'Hurry! Take him to your mother. Poor thing, he is very hungry.'

But my brother would not stop wailing, so I started to pucker my lips and recreated the been music and drummed on the flour canister. And he stopped crying. I picked him up and hurried towards the mill. After sometime he started to wail again and I once again produced the music puckering my lips. He stopped wailing. Now he was sleepy and so he started to nod. I continued in this fashion all the way—every time he would wake up and cry I would recreate the music and he would go back to sleep. When I finally reached the mill my mother was waiting for us. She was angry with me for being so late and scolded me, 'Where the hell were you all this time? Don't you have the sense to realize that he is hungry?'

I was just a child then, and had reached the mill walking three to four kilometres in the sun! I sat sulking in one corner. Ma started to feed my brother and I watched my brother suckle. He was indeed very hungry. Ma continued to cut the yarn with my brother suckling at her breast. As soon as he finished his feed he defecated and soiled Ma's sari. She picked up some waste cotton and cleaned him. She picked him up and as she was going out she turned to me and said that she was going to wash her sari and I must just stay where I was. I asked if I could cut the yarn and she said I could but must be careful and not chop off my finger.

Ma went out. I started cutting the yarn. Soon an older boy came near me. He too worked in the mill. He said he would show me different machines in the mill and took me to the storeroom behind the yarn section. Nobody was in that room and there was another room behind it which was used to store all the discarded machinery of the mill. It was

such a deserted place that no human being, not even a bird, ever entered that room. I was scared. That boy stood near a machine and started to show me its various parts: 'Look how large these wings are!' He kept cajoling me and gradually came and stood behind me. He continued to show me the various parts of the machine and kept pressing my chest. Suddenly I felt something piercing my back and I turned around. I saw his pants were lying near his feet. I had not even realized when he had removed his pants. I was terrified to see him naked and tried to run away from there. He caught me and frightened me with stories of ghosts. I struggled to free myself but he caught my hands and threatened me with the knife used for cutting yarn. I bawled and now he was scared of getting caught. As he bent down to wear his pants, I darted from there. When he saw me running he shouted, buttoning up his pants, 'If you dare to tell anyone I'll shove this knife up your arse.'

I ran straight to the yarn section, but Ma was not around. Then I went looking for her in the crèche. She was rocking my brother to sleep. As soon as she saw me she said, 'Thank God you've come. Now sit here and if he wakes up rock him back to sleep.'

16. Clothes

I often heard the elders in the moholla comment, 'Bhai, however nice a person may seem to be, under his clothes, he is naked. So don't trust people so easily.' The real image of a person emerges when the clothes are discarded. But to the elders of the moholla, the *chaudashiyas*–those who gloat over the misfortune of others–were naked even when fully clothed. There is an apt saying, *ek noor aadmi, hazzar noor kapda*; clothes enhance a handsome person's personality a thousand times. There are some people who are not impressive to look at but when they are all suited and booted they acquire a different air. Clothes are often considered symbols of love, unity and cooperation and that is why at many places wearing clothes that serve to identify, act like a uniform, prevails. Our mendicants wear saffron clothes and widows wear white. In schools both the rich and the poor wear the same uniform and a lot of importance is given to this practice in the police and the armed forces.

Many people love to wear good and different kinds of clothes; it is their passion. Some change their dress many times during the day. Their nightclothes, which they call night dress, is different from what they wear during the day. Their bathing suits are different and they also have a separate set of clothes for morning walks, wedding and wedding parties. These days many even don different costumes; the only thing that has not changed much is the shroud used at the time of death.

In our moholla a large number of people wore only a panchiyu–a short loincloth. Most of the time the upper part of the body remained bare like the mendicants', though some did wear a short

shirt called bandi or bandiyu. The panchiyu had a multiple usage. It was used as a towel after bath, as a napkin to wipe hand and face and at times also as a headgear as nobody could move around in the village bareheaded. When the dalits went to collect wood they would tie up the panchiyu in a knot and place it on the head so that a basket could be put on it. This way the panchiyu was woven into a dalit's life. The panchiyu was usually woven on the loom at home. Those who were better off in the moholla or were the leaders of the community wore turbans. There were some who wore white or black caps. My father always wore a black cap.

The dalits were not allowed to wear good clothes. I remember an incident in a village where a dalit boy was made to wallow in the mud and dirty his new clothes. Nor could they go around in the village bareheaded; the girls had to cover their head and if ever a girl's sari slipped from her head she would be talked about unpleasantly. One of the elders in the village would say: 'Alya, whose daughter is she? Hasn't her mother taught her anything? If you go around with your face uncovered you'll catch somebody's fancy.'

Immediately that girl would cover her head. She had to follow this code of conduct strictly in her own village, as she would have to do in her parents-in-law's place.

Food, clothing and housing are the basic necessities of life. Then, depending on the economic and material position of a person, other things get added. In my case clothes were considered to be sheer necessity. When I was very small I used to go about the moholla only in a kurta, and it did not seem unbecoming at all. When I became older Ma would force me to wear shorts to avoid people's comments. My kaki used to often say: 'Look at him! He's such a hunk now! Why don't you make him wear a pair of shorts or something?'

'Alya, you village bumpkin, how long will you go around in your birthday suit? Go and wear shorts.'

Ma was aware that I should be wearing shorts, but I would be so engrossed in playing that she could never lay her hands on me. After such comments, she forced me to wear shorts. In the beginning I found the shorts bothersome and heavy but as I grew older, clothes began to interest me. I wanted to wear good clothes

like other people. Up to the seventh standard I wore kurta and shorts. Only on special occasions, as when I had to visit my maternal uncle, or my sister's parents-in-law, or had to participate in a sport in another town, would I wear a pair of trousers, which I borrowed from a friend in the moholla. This friend always wore well-ironed clothes so as soon as I came back I washed and ironed the trousers before I gave them back. I had to borrow the iron too from him. He had a coal iron, which I filled up with pieces of coal and paper, poured a little kerosene and lit it. I could iron pretty well and sometimes I used to iron Pitaji's kurta.

I remember once I had got a black silk kurta stiched. Though Mira's verse '*Odhu hun kalo kamlo dujo dag na lage koi.*' (I wear a black shawl so that it cannot be stained further) did not apply in my case, my kurta did get stained. There was a teacher in my school called Brahambhatt Sahib who was from a nearby village. He could not stand my wearing this kurta. He had thought that I had got it stitched to show off and there was reason enough to prove his belief right. My close friend Baldev used to wear very stylish clothes. Since both his parents received good salaries and he was their only son, he was brought up with a lot of care and affection. At times he came to school wearing a silk bandana around his neck. I was always with him so the teacher had thought that I too had got this silk shirt stitched to show off! Only I knew the mystery behind this black silk shirt. I did not have a single shirt to wear to school so my Pitaji took me to buy a length of cloth for a shirt. The shopkeeper had shown us a black piece of cloth, which had been lying in his shop unsold for a long time. Generally black cloth loses strength if it is not used for a long time and so he sold us this length at a throwaway price and I got a kurta made for myself. I never let that teacher know the truth and so I had to often bear the brunt of his comments, at times three to four times in a week. He would say: 'Go ahead and splurge, after all it's your parent's money. Only when you start earning you will realize its value.'

At times there would be direct confrontation: 'Does it suit you?'

I would smile and not respond because I was very respectful towards my teachers. This teacher had never said a word against Baldev even though he was always dressed in expensive clothes but

then Baldev was not a dalit. It was after all the upper caste's prerogative to wear good clothes and my black silk kurta was seen as something that I did not deserve to wear. But how long could this kurta last especially when I wore it day in and day out? Finally it wore out and I wore it as long as it could be mended. Then a friend gave me a green shirt; in exchange I had to teach him maths and help him with words. The comments stopped once I started going to school in this green shirt.

When I joined high school I started to wear kurta and pajamas. This was the first time I had got a kurta-pajama stitched for myself. My maternal uncle had given the cloth to me when I had visited him. My mama used to sell short dhoti, sheets and sundry other cloth pieces woven on the loom. He carried the lot on his shoulders to sell in the market. The cloth-piece that I had was the cheapest variety of coarse khadi. I wore this kurta-pajama to school for the whole year, and in this coarse khadi I looked slightly older but my teachers approved my easy acceptance of khadi, as at that time khadi was associated with pride in one's nation. They felt I was showing my patriotism by wearing it.

Once a miraculous fortune befell me: I found a gold ring lying on the road. I picked it up and brought it home and showed it to Ma and Pitaji. They examined it carefully to assess its genuineness. Then Pitaji said, 'How can a gold ring be found lying on the road?'

Finally after much scrutiny it was decided that it was a genuine gold ring. My happiness knew no bounds. Ma had even commented: 'Now don't blabber to anyone or somebody will accuse you of stealing.'

Pitaji wanted to sell the ring and pay off some of his debts but I wanted to get a pair of trousers and shirt stitched for myself to wear to school. Ma sided with me. After a tiff between Ma and Pitaji my wish was granted. Ma's face lit up looking at the glow of happiness on my face. For the first time in my life I was going to wear a pair of trousers and a shirt! I even had dreams of it at night. I went to the goldsmith to sell the ring. First, he scrutinized the ring for a long time, turning it again and again. Then he tested it by rubbing it on the stone near him. Once he was assured of its genuineness he questioned me at length. He was curious

because I was so young to sell a gold ring and also because I was a dalit. He grilled me like a policeman: why had no grown up accompanied me? Where did I live? Who was my father? When he heard my father's name he immediately recognized me and said, 'So you're Shiva Contrati's son? Why did not you say so? Why did not your Bapa come?'

'He's gone to the mill. My mother has sent me here.'

Now he was convinced that it was not stolen goods. I too had hidden the fact that I had found the ring on the road. If I had told him the truth he would have started his search for the real owner or would have found a fake owner. So I had told him that it was my ring.

I saw that just below this shop there were people collecting dust. These *dhuldhoyas* collected dust near goldsmith's shops, which they would then wash in the lake and then sift in search of gold dust. The first time I saw them washing dust in the lake I was puzzled. Why were they washing dust? Had they lost something? Then when I saw them collecting dust and dirt near the goldsmith's shop, I knew they were trying to look for a fortune in the dust. I often wondered looking at their bare bodies whether they had ever found even a speck of gold in their lives? If these people were searching for their fate in the dust, the dalits were getting mired deep into the muck of untouchability. I had not gone to wash dust and yet I had found not a speck, not even a small piece, but a whole nugget of gold!

The goldsmith's examination was not over yet. I wondered how somebody who took such meticulous care to make ornaments would allow anything to go waste in the dust. And yet those dhuldhoyas washed and sifted dust for years. Sometime back, visiting Madurai and Madras, I came across similar dhuldhoyas in front of goldsmiths' shops. There must be many such people in our country! Finally when the goldsmith was satisfied, he deducted a sum for another metal that had been added to make the ring and gave me the rest saying: 'Now go straight home and give the money to your mother.'

He had feared that I would spend or lose the money on the way. I took whatever he gave me without haggling about the amount he had deducted. After all does one worry about the teeth of a

cow given in alms? I was more excited about the clothes I was going to get stitched. There was money leftover and with that Ma bought grain for the family.

When I was in the first year of college I had just one outfit which I wore to college every day. It was a pair of machine-knit trousers and a nylon shirt. My elder brother had acquired this from his printer friend. It did not require much care, especially ironing. It was dark coloured so the dirt did not show. I would wash it whenever I needed to at night and by morning it would be dry. I used to leave Kalol at six in the morning to catch a train to Ahmedabad to attend college, and my clothes suited the train journey. Some students in college passed various comments on seeing me wear the same clothes every day. Somebody would say: 'Hey you seem to like this outfit a lot. It's quite nice. Why don't you lend it to me one day. I too would like to try it out!'

Though it was said in jest but had he really meant it I would not have been in a position to lend it to him. Some others would joke about it:

'Hey Jadav, we know one has to wear a uniform in school but you seem to follow the rule even in college!'

I would reply in a way that suggested I had many clothes: 'Yaar, I like this dress a lot. In fact this is my favourite.'

I had to play this game of pretence especially because I was studying in Ahmedabad. I had started to write poems around this time. Watching students creating a racket in the class I had written the poem, 'Study and Let Others Study', and my short story 'Crumbling Bricks' was also written on this theme. It was published in *Abil Gulal* along with my photograph. Dr. Shivlal Jeshalpura taught us Gujarati in college. He liked my poem and so he read it out in class. He had discussed the poem with Joravarsingh Jadav who at that time studied in St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad. Mr. Jadav had come to my college especially to meet me. Dressed in my machine-knit trousers and nylon shirt I must have appeared a stylish person! This happened with people who saw me for the first time in this outfit because though I was poor it had an expensive look! It was also very durable. It lasted even when I came to the second year of college.

While I was in college I thought that once I got a job I would buy clothes to my liking. But even after I had secured a job this desire was not fulfilled. I continued to wear trousers and shirts but of an inexpensive quality. Once a friend had said to me in college, 'Yaar, if I were working like you I would have got myself a smart pair of trousers.' In my case after I started working my responsibility increased. In Nadiad I worked and also studied at the same time. I lived alone so I would cook both the meals at the same time. I would usually make rotis and a vegetable and on holidays kichri in the evenings. At first, when I had not learnt to cook, I ate in a 'lodge': a cheap eating-place. I would order a 'half meal'. I was then a budding youth and so needed to eat a great deal. The half meal had a limited quantity of food. The serving of rice and rotis used to be limited but one could have extra helpings of vegetables and dal. I would fill my stomach with lots of dal and vegetables and the net result was that I gained an adequate amount of vitamins. It was never a matter of concern as to what vegetables were being served or how tasty the dish was. I was content with the food because whatever I was eating was much better than what I used to get at home. In the lodge they gave raw onion in the salad and I would then recall how in the moholla my meal would be only rotis and onion. I had to save every paisa to send home to my parents and my siblings, so in such circumstances how could I think of stitching good clothes for myself?

After completing my BA, when I cleared the competitive examination of the Gujarat Public Service Commission and was recruited as a direct candidate for the post of mamlatdar-taluka or district-level revenue officer. I had imagined that it would be possible for me to wear good clothes. But in spite of becoming a mamlatdar my financial conditions had not changed. I had to send money home regularly and I also had to repay the huge debt that Father had incurred. Moreover, there were expenses on the occasions of marriages and simanthonayans—the ceremony of putting rice and coconut in the lap of a woman who was pregnant for the first time. I also had to maintain my status as a mamlatdar. For the first time I bought six stainless steel plates, glasses, bowls and other utensils, but to do that I had to borrow money. I

remember I had bought four canvas chairs so that I could receive guests at home.

At the time of my wife's simanthonayan I could have bought an expensive suit-length and made myself a proper suit, which I was not able to do at the time of my wedding. I did get a suit stitched for myself but from inexpensive cloth bought not from any proper shop but from one that sold lengths of cloth. I had bought four pieces of blue coloured cloth and got a suit made out of them. I was keen to buy a pair of good shoes but finally settled for a pair of sandals. My desire to wear good clothes had to be kept at bay for a long time. As a result, I learnt to take care of my clothes, which usually lasted a long time. Even today I wear clothes stitched more than thirty-five years ago, though not to office. They are perfectly fine to wear at home. I still have a shirt, which I had got stitched twenty-five years back. I wear this shirt at least eight to ten times in a year. There is a small anecdote associated with this shirt. I had bought this length of cloth for my father. When I had shown it to him he had said: 'Bhai, this cloth is a little coarse. I would prefer a slightly finer cloth for my kurta.' So I got a shirt stitched for myself, and bought him a fine length for a kurta. I even bought him gold buttons to wear with it; after all he was now the father of a mamlatdar.

My new position raised the expectations of my family members. They were not at fault. But I knew my circumstances and so did Bharti. She was in true sense my *ardhangini*, my better half. She had a fine understanding of the situation. She never expected any expensive saris from me. She not only had a warm heart, but she was also very beautiful. However inexpensive her sari was, it looked sophisticated when she wore it, and because I was a mamlatdar, nobody believed that she could wear inexpensive clothes. Once Bharti had worn a fake gold chain when she was visiting my family in the moholla. Many looked at the chain and asked her, 'How many grams of gold? Looks quite heavy.'

We had laughed and said it was of imitation gold. But nobody believed us. One of my sisters-in-law had even commented: 'Come, come Mamlatdarsahib, don't try to fool us. Don't think we are duffers.'

Bharti's circumstances were similar to mine. When we got married in 1964 I had given Ma a gold tulsimala and my sister, who was in the tenth standard, a gold chain. Till 1981 I had not given Bharti a single gold ornament. When I was a mamlatdar she often had to be present at official functions with me. We also attended many lunch and dinner parties at the Raj Bhavan and weddings at friends' and relatives' places. While attending these functions she wore only glass or plastic bangles on her hands. She had never let me feel that she minded this, though she must have noticed gold bangles on the hands of many close acquaintances attending these functions. Finally I bought two broad gold bangles, a necklace and a pair of earrings for her. On 7 October 1981 a son was born to us after two daughters, and so there was celebration in the house. I distributed sweets to everyone who lived in the premises of the Raj Bhavan. Bharti's happiness knew no bounds. Diwali was just twenty days away and so we had decided to celebrate it with great pomp. I bought new clothes for my daughters and a beautiful sari from Ahmedabad for Bharti. I went twice to Ahmedabad to change it. I too got two suits made for myself. But the ornaments and suits remained unused. As I have mentioned earlier, on the night of Kali Chaudash, Bharti died in the hospital. We were left to weep on Diwali.

Gradually my family responsibilities lessened. Today I have many suits, though some of them are made from cheap cloth. I have many outfits but I am moving away from such pleasures. My days of wearing good clothes and enjoying the good things of life are over. Now I wear clothes as a necessity, just as I used to wear them earlier. I do not have to dress to look good. 'Clothes enhance a person's image a thousand times.' Until now I had not allowed that saying to be proved true but it was becoming evident.

17. Band Company

The Muslim kasba was very close to our moholla. During Moharram when they took out the procession of Tazias we would rush to their colony. Ma would say, 'If a person walks under a Tazia he or she would never get fever, nor anything ill would happen to him.'

So we would always pass under a Tazia and go along with the procession, which used to be taken around the town. Many higher caste people too followed this ritual, as it was believed that by doing so one's wishes got fulfilled. On the eve of Moharram we visited their kasba and spent the night watching the ritual of *Katle ki Raat* (the night before Moharram, when Muslims mourn the cruel deaths of Hussein and Hassan in the desert). We never hesitated to visit the Muslim kasba because there was no restriction of any kind on us—no untouchability. Unlike the Hindus they never considered us to be low. Some of the Muslim women had names that were similar to ours, like 'Jeevli' or 'Kamudi'. When the Muslim men circumambulated the Tazia in tune of '*Hai Dos . . .Hai Dos*', we children often joined them and beat our chests with two hands, one on the other and repeated after them. I remember as a child I would always be present at the kasba whenever there was a wedding but I have no recollection of attending any weddings or festival of any higher caste Hindus. If we ever, even unknowingly, passed by their area we were greeted with insulting words. We could pay our obeisance to the deity in the temple of Mahakali at the entrance of our moholla only from a distance and we have never had even a glimpse of the deity in the temple of Khodiar Ma in the town square.

The main attraction of the wedding in the kasba was the band. Living so close to the kasba the band proved to be a great source of entertainment for us. We would rush there to listen to the songs they played on their instruments. But more than the songs, which I did not understand much, being quite small, it was their dress that attracted me most. I would spend hours admiring their completely different way of dressing—the shape of their hats, the epaulettes on their shoulders, the cut of their coats and trousers, the bright colours and the intricate gold embroidery—all these were things I loved to watch because nobody I met in my day-to-day life wore this kind of dress. It aroused a great deal of questions in my mind regarding these people. Their huge musical instruments, especially the drums, flutes and accordion made me wonder how they had learnt to play them and how long they had taken to master them, and so on. Their coordination and the conductor's gestures and notation sheets in front of them were all a matter of great amazement to me as a child.

Sometimes the *kavvals* were called to a wedding in the kasba. The kavvali would start at night and continue till the early hours of the next morning. At times, woman singers were called and dancing girls too visited the kasba. These women were known by different names. Whenever there was a function like this my friends came to call me, 'Come let's go to the kasba. Today a dancing girl is going to perform.'

As the night progressed the kavvali singing became charged and the audience showered the singers with currency notes to the appreciative chanting of 'Wah, Wah' or 'Shubhanallah'. The rich merchants would send their sons of my age on the stage with currency notes, which they would turn over the head of the singers before handing over to them. Some even garlanded the singers with currency notes. It was the only occasion when I got to see so much money and it left me completely dazed. My attention would get diverted from the singer to the money and I would be flummoxed to think how much these singers earned if at one function they received so much money, and I also wondered what they did with all this money. The higher caste people also attended these kavvali functions and so did the adults of the moholla. No invitation was sent but a large

crowd gathered on the open ground. It also attracted vendors who sold mouth-watering non-vegetarian fare like mutton samosas from their carts. The tea stall vendors made quite a profit during these occasions. It felt as if the night had turned into day; and we watched the show without spending a penny. The mouth-watering aroma of hot mutton samosas filled the air and our nostrils but I had to control my immense desire to taste them and be satisfied with the aroma.

Whenever the band played at night the place would be lit with kerosene lamps that the labourers held on their heads. The light of these lamps added extra glitter to the shine of the dresses of the players. The most popular song at that time used to be '*Rajaki aayegi barat*' and whenever it was played we used to dance to its tune and felt as if the wedding was taking place in our family.

Then one day I found a flute that I had seen with the band party in my house. My elder brother had kept it inside a wall-cupboard. I took it out when he was not around and kept turning it around, admiring its shine and observing the holes. Until then, I had blown only an ordinary whistle, and so I kept wondering about the holes on the flute. This was a rare experience for me because I had seen a flute only from a distance when the flautist in the band played it. Moreover, I knew Motabhai would never let me touch it and if by chance he came to know that I had touched it he would have scolded me and snatched it from my hands saying, 'Now don't touch it. You'll break it.'

The question of how it came in our house remained unanswered. How did Motabhai get it? Did he know anyone in the band and had borrowed it from him? Then one day I saw him play the flute, but of course he could not play as well as the bandmaster. He looked at me and said, 'Now look here, don't touch this flute because if it breaks I'll be put to trouble. It's an expensive instrument.'

I did not have the courage to touch it in his presence but when he went out and there was nobody in the house I would lock the doors from inside, then take out the flute and try to play a tune. Once I had been caned for whistling so I had to be very careful. Then one day to my great surprise I saw the dress of a band player in Motabhai's bag. I was curious; how did he get the

dress? Did he find the bag with the dress on the road? What would he do with this dress? I kept staring at the dress when Motabhai smiled at my questioning look and said, 'One day, I'll take you to the band.'

Then I realized that he had joined the band. During the day he worked in the mill and on holidays or at night he worked in the band on hourly wages. As promised, one day Motabhai took me to the band. When I reached there I found that he was well acquainted and friendly with everyone in the team. On that day they had fallen short of one player and that was why Motabhai had taken me along. But I was scared because I could not play any instrument, and had watched the musicians from a distance and had only held the flute in my hand. So what did they expect from me? What if I failed miserably? And yet to my great surprise I was asked to put on the dress and join the team.

We had to play at a wedding in a village called Karan Nagar near Kadi. When we reached Karan Nagar I felt a strange exhilaration within me. I was the youngest in the team. I did not have to play any instrument; all I had to do was to carry a huge instrument with bellows. I too walked slowly along with others, carrying this huge instrument on my shoulder, keeping pace with their march. I looked like one of them in the uniform and because I did not want others to think that I was there only to carry the instrument I had put its nozzle in my mouth. People thought I was one of the musicians. They looked at me with astonishment because I was the youngest in the team and I was carrying the largest instrument. The elders looked as if they could not believe their eyes and the youngsters walked along with me. Once the recital was over I went and kept the heavy instrument along with others in a room. I was happy to be rid of the load. When I came out, the youngsters gathered around me to ask several questions and I had great fun exploiting their ignorance.

A meal had been arranged for us. We sat with the rest of the team to eat inside a room. Motabhai was unaffected but I was getting quite anxious. How could we sit with the others? What if they came to know that we were untouchables? They would then beat us hollow; even break a bone or two. At that time it was impossible to even think of sitting together, leave aside eating

together. But because of Motabhai's friendship with the Master no one could say a word. Motabhai knew about their discomfort so he kept a gap and sat at a distance from his friends. I was unaware of Motabhai's concern and so I sat in the gap that he had maintained with the others. With no gap between us it appeared as if we were all sitting together to share a meal. The person sitting next to me belonged to the Vaghri community, and it was just not possible for him to sit next to me. But in the presence of Motabhai he could not say anything. So he got up immediately and went and sat in the row opposite ours. This is how we had our meal together.

I recall now how in High School we had memorized in parrot-like manner the Sanskrit shloka: '*Sahanavavatu . . . sahanabhunaktu*', 'Let us play together . . . let us eat together. . .'

18. A Wristwatch

Once when I was very small I had bought a toy wristwatch for an anna from a local fair. There used to be a fair on Dharo Atham—the eighth day of the bright half (*shukla pakhsha*) of the month of Bhadra (mid-September to mid-October)—in Pavathi, and the moholla boys bought balloons, balls, toy telescopes, wooden flutes or coloured spectacles. These objects cost only an anna or so. Even the spectacles were not of glass but made of plastic. Whenever we bought a toy we used to be thrilled for the few days that it lasted. It also brought tears to our eyes when it broke. My wristwatch was just a toy but it did show correct time twice a day when the hour struck the time denoted by its hands on the dial. I recall Ma's laughter at my choice and her comment, 'Look at this boy showing off his watch! Why didn't you instead buy some goodies to eat? It would have at least filled your stomach!'

I do not know even today, why I had selected a watch then. As Ma had predicted, even in years to come after I had a job, my struggle for a decent meal did not allow me to buy a watch. In school, whenever I managed to get hold of a fountain pen, I would draw a beautiful watch with bands on my wrist. My friends used to admire my drawing and ask me to draw similar ones on their wrist. It was all done in jest and gave us immense pleasure. How excited we were with these watches as if we had worn real ones!

Since the time I learnt to hold a pencil correctly in my hand I loved to draw circles. I had always found circles easy to draw the number and that must have been the reason why I learnt to draw the number one in Gujarati so easily. All I had to do once I had drawn a circle was to draw a straight line going down from it. In this circle if I made two dots then it became a face and if I added two lines then it became a watch. Then as I grew up how much I learnt to do from this circle or zero! The number one that I had learnt to make from this circle I maintained in all my classes till I completed the matriculation examination. Even in my matriculation examination I secured a first class. And yet I could not buy that round wristwatch that I had craved for as a child.

Time never stops—not even when the watch has stopped. We cannot see time; we can only measure it with the help of the watch hands, which move round and round constantly indicating time. In my case I have spent days and years without these hands. When I desperately needed a watch I did not have one. During my childhood very few people in the moholla had a watch. Those who owned one cared for it as if it were an object of luxury and not one of utility. But then nobody really felt the need to look at a watch. The morning shift people would wake up with the five-thirty whistle of the mill. Then there was the seven o'clock whistle when the first shift started. After that there was the eleven-fifteen whistle announcing the break, and the eleven forty-five for the end of the break. After this, at quarter to four, the whistle was sounded to indicate the end of the first shift. The second shift whistle was heard at four and the third shift at midnight. At eight and eight-thirty at night there was a whistle for the beginning of recess and at

its end. The moholla people's concept of time had been intricately woven with the sound of these whistles. It was because of the early morning whistle that I woke up before sunrise. I loved the crimson sky before the sunrise and can now understand why people worship the rising sun. This crimson colour used to touch and cover my cheeks and maybe because of this reason my cheeks had turned copper!

I do not remember having ever been late for school because of the lack of a watch. I had to reach early because I was given the charge to ensure that the students formed proper lines, sat in rows, and after prayer I also had to make them say their tables. When I reached High School I had to reach early to write a suitable quote and the current news on the main blackboard of the school. I had to leave early so that I could reach Ahmedabad on time to attend classes at my college. The train left Kalol station at six in the morning. I left home as soon as the five-thirty whistle sounded in the morning. Though I did not have a watch I do not remember having ever missed the train. To leave at five-thirty in the morning I had to get up at least at four-thirty. Since we did not have a toilet in the house I had to carry a latrine tin and go to the fields before daybreak. Then after a bath I would get ready, have my tea and rotlo, and leave for college. At that time I never missed having a watch. Though I had to walk quite a distance in the morning, I never felt the need of a cycle. Maybe if I had the money I would have felt the need for all these things!

When I was in the second year of college I got a job in Nadiad. I continued studying at the college in Ahmedabad and initially I used to commute from Nadiad to Ahmedabad. I worked in the night shift and so my duty used to get over at twelve at night. Even if I walked very fast, as I did not have a bicycle at that time, it took about half an hour to reach home. My office was at one end of the town and I lived in a rented room in the dalit moholla at the other end of the town, an area called Marida Bhagol, on the outskirts of Nadiad; dalits always had their colonies on the outskirts of a village or a town. In Kalol I lived at a place called Bhadiadri Bhagol, again on the outskirts of the town. After I reached home at twelve-thirty I

always read for a while. At that time my routine was to keep awake till midnight and to read for a while before going to bed. It used to be almost past one-thirty by the time I slept. I was so scared of missing the train that once I had got up very early and left for the station, and only when I reached there I saw that it was two-thirty in the morning! Realizing the futility of going back, I spent the night at the station. Now when I look back I see that I could have bought a watch at that time as I was working, but the thought of my responsibility for the entire family stopped me from buying one.

I got married when I was in Junior BA. I remember I had bought an inexpensive khadi cloth length to stitch my wedding clothes. Even the money for the dapa had to be borrowed from a friend who had taken it as a loan from his Provident Fund. My wedding was to be in Ahmedabad, and so everybody felt that it would be unbecoming of the groom if he visited the bride's place situated in such a large city without a watch on his wrist. My elder brother requested a guest who had come to attend the wedding to loan his watch for the event. At night after the wedding feast was over the friend had to return home, and so he asked for his watch. I removed the watch from my wrist and handed it back to him. Now the groom was without a watch. When my father saw this, I think at that time he minded much more than I did.

In my final year of BA, I was in Nadiad's C. B. Patel's Arts College, and I had to put in a lot of work. This college was very far from where I lived–at the other end of Nadiad, near Uttarsanda village. I cooked both the meals in the morning, and as it was an afternoon college, I would have my lunch and walk to college. Then after I returned from college I would pack my dinner in a box and walk to my workplace. There was a bicycle shop just below my place of work and the owner knew me quite well. He was aware that I had to spend a lot of time commuting. Then one day I requested him to lend me a cycle on credit. He agreed and I paid him back gradually in instalments. Suddenly one day Pitaji came to see me. He had brought a wristwatch for me. I looked at the watch for a long time, turning it over and over again. I was greatly delighted and

yet I told him, 'Why did you spend so much money? How will you meet the expenses of the house?'

'But I haven't paid a paisa yet. I'll pay back in instalments.'

'How much do you have to pay?'

'Rs. 80.'

I realized that he was being over-charged for the watch, but then he had taken it on credit and was going to pay the shopkeeper in instalments, so why would the shopkeeper charge less? Thus I acquired my first watch in my final year of BA. But time passes by, with or without a watch. There was a time when I did not have a single watch and then when I acquired one I started to collect many more.

I remember when I was a mamlatdar in Dholka Taluka I was given a wall clock by the district administration for the commendable work I had done in the field of family planning. This was the beginning of my acquisition of clocks and watches. When I was posted at the Raj Bhavan, the then governor of Gujarat, His Excellency R. K. Trivedi, presented another wall clock to me. And then when I retired from the services, the Gandhinagar Buddhist Society gave me a table clock. When I look at all these clocks, old memories well up afresh in my mind.

19. Mushayara

Mojbhai teacher lived in the Muslim kasba near our moholla, and I got to know him when I was at Bharat High School. I went to him for a while to learn Urdu and Persian, acquiring only the basics of the language; I had learnt the alphabet and before I could master the script I had to give up my Persian lessons because I could not go to him regularly. Mojbhai too was very busy in his work. He knew many Urdu poets and though I had to give up learning Persian in my effort to eke out a living, I had many opportunities to attend mushayaras because of him. Whenever there was a mushayara he would send for me. These recitals took place at night and that suited me. I did not have to run around so much as I have to do now and so I had time on my hand. The language often posed a problem but I could get an overall sense of what was being said. Sometimes when I was stuck I would ask Mojbhai. At times when I was confident that I had understood the poem well, Mojbhai's interpretation changed its entire meaning and I would be awestruck by his explanation. I was not interested in writing poetry but I enjoyed attending these mushayaras. As the night advanced, the gathering became more and more interesting. Sometimes Gujarati *shayars* (poets who wrote in the style of Urdu poetry) used to visit these gatherings and then Gujarati *shayaris* would be recited. I still remember a stanza written by a shayar named Arman who used to reside in Kalol. He had said about his pen name:

Na bagomien rehta hun, na viranome rehata hun.
Nam hen mera 'Arman', mein dilon mein rehta hun.

(I don't reside in the gardens nor in the deserted places,
My name is 'Arman' [hope] and I live in the hearts of the people.)

I had listened to these lines some forty years ago but even today I am able to recall them because of the name of the poet.

I was a regular attendant at poetry recitals and literary discourses. I remember listening to Dhumketu and Jyotindra Dave. The latter's humorous light-hearted words matched his frail physique. He regaled the audience by explaining how his inability to digest the heavy laddus had forced him to live on a diet of two light rotis. I recall going from Kalol to Ahmedabad to attend Ramanlal Yagnik's lecture on Shakespeare at the Gujarat College. And at another time I had an opportunity to listen to Umashankar Joshi's speech at the university's open-air theatre. In those days it was considered a great fortune to be able to listen to such scholars as S. R. Bhatt and Feeroz Davar.

I have been greatly influenced by the story of Shravan—his sense of filial duty towards his parents. I had no faith in God then, but I remember I used to light an incense stick in front of a mounted paper on which I had inscribed 'Mother and Father'. For me, my dalit parents were my Gods because they had not only battled with life but also struggled hard, and at times at the cost of their own lives, to bring us up. They had always tried to ensure that we faced no problems. I too, in turn, tried my best not become a burden on them. I did many sundry jobs for them and considered it my good fortune to be able to help them. I do not remember my father ever having to get water from the pot in my presence. I would finish all the jobs that he had assigned, even if it meant staying awake till late hours. I have watched from close quarters the life of not only my parents but also other dalit parents. And I have experienced their deep heartaches and tears.

Once my kaka came to visit us. It was past eleven at night and he had run out of his stock of beedis. Pitaji offered him some from his stock but Kaka was worried about what he would do in the morning. The beedis had to be bought from a tea stall, which was at some distance, and to reach it the naveli—the narrow lane—had to be crossed. The place was always dark as somebody or the other always broke the bulbs that the municipal corporation

installed. My kaka first asked his son to get him his supply of beedis. But he refused to go out in the dark. Then he asked me to get them. I had been brought up to run errands for the elders and never refused to carry these out. So I went out in the dark and bought him his beedis. His face lit up with joy and he immediately uttered some choicest expletives for his son. On that day I had satisfied his longing for beedi.

Of course, there was another reason, besides darkness, for my cousin's refusal to go to buy beedis. Many people including my bhabhi had sighted a snake there. The women of the moholla generally used the naveli to pee. Sometimes men too relieved themselves here. As a result, the earth had caved in. Once a snake had entered the moholla through this naveli and after this incident it had lost its eyesight. It then roamed around that place. Generally a snake would slide away in a flash the minute it sighted a person; but this one remained right there. This was enough for people to start speculating about how it had lost its sight. Somebody suggested, 'Some menstruating woman must have peed here.'

Another one said: 'Some woman in unwashed clothes must have peed here.'

A third person added softly, 'It must have fallen into the urine of a woman who has just delivered.'

And then a heated discussion would ensue as to who had just given birth or who had had their periods around that time.

In this naveli a woman would keep two girls on guard so that no men could enter while she was relieving herself. If she happened to be alone, she would just squat to pee and if some male unknowingly entered that place he would turn back and leave the place immediately. After waiting for a while he would come back and if the woman had still not finished, he would turn back and mumble, 'How much has she filled up inside?' Sometimes when a male entered the naveli a woman would get up and hurriedly disappear into the moholla. At times we were asked to stand on guard when one of the elderly women of the moholla or a bhabhi wanted to use the place. They would tell us: 'Alya, keep a watch, don't let anyone come.'

Occasionally, men also used this place and then women would wait for them to finish. This way it had become a designated place

to urinate. The place stank and at times younger children used the place to defecate. We even played marbles in the depressions created by frequent urination. This naveli was also frequented by thieves. They visited this place around one o' clock at night because they knew that around that time even the twelve o' clock shift workers would have either reached home or decided to spend the night at the mill. Many in the moholla were scared of thieves. Some well-known thieves used to steal even during daytime. Once I was alone at home and was busy playing outside. The house was unlocked and the door was wide open. I went inside to drink water and when I opened the back window I noticed some movement behind the charpoy that was kept next to the window. It gave me such a scare that I ran outside. When after sometime I mustered the courage to go inside and look out of the window I did not find anyone behind the cot. These were usually petty thieves who stole one or two brass plates or glasses.

Many in the moholla went to work in the third shift, which meant they had to leave home at eleven-thirty at night. It was quite a task for the family members to wake them up at that hour and very often one could hear some father's loud curses trying to wake up a son, 'Does he realize how I had to beg and plead to get him this job? How long will he be able to keep his job if he sleeps like this?'

When the mills started *chagdi* many lost their jobs. Chagdi meant that one labourer would man six machines at a time, which was quite a tough thing to do. At such times labourers cursed the mukadams because some of these mukadams sided with the mill owners and betrayed the dalits. Everybody was aware of this fact but they could do nothing. The mukadams often took money from the labourers to get them a substitute's position in the mill and at times people even tried to placate them with a bottle of liquor. Some of them in khadi kurta and dhoti looked like politicians.

Usually, at night the labourers gathered at the moholla temple for a chat. Most of their conversation centred on the mill how the thread broke easily, how someone slipped carrying the basket of bobbins, or how someone hurt his finger in the machine. Sometimes they deliberated on the problems of the community,

the question of including women in the bridegroom's party, somebody's divorce case, or the incident of some city-bred daughter-in-law running away from her in-laws' place to her father's house. They even discussed how the son finished off the booze that his father had bought for himself and how it resulted in a massive fight between the two, or of some woman who had married again having brought with her the child by her previous marriage. The juiciest topic of heated discussion would be of the quarrels between the children by two marriages or a team of children born of a cuckolded husband. They would even go to the extent of speculating in great detail about which child resembled whom in the moholla. Their talks were often mere speculations discussed over a bundle of beedis or a long pull at the chillum. These gossip sessions were in a way a kind of mushayra and lasted for a great length of time.

The mill operated a dispensary for its employees. Whenever somebody had an injury, his finger either was caught in the machines or he had hammered it while breaking coals, he would visit the clinic. I too went there to treat my cuts or bruises received while breaking coals or carrying baskets of ash. I had been so often to this dispensary with my father that the compounder knew me pretty well. He of course knew me as 'Shiva Contrati's son' and not by my name. He would always give me a piece of bandage to tie up my wound. Sometimes I would ask for an extra bandage to tie up some other boy's wound. He would often give me a piece of cotton wool dipped in eucalyptus oil and say, 'Inhale this and your cold will be cured.' I liked the fragrance of this oil. Just as some shopkeepers give toffees to children, this compounder gave me oil-soaked cotton wool because he knew my father well. When other boys went to ask for one he would drive them away with curses.

20. Deliberation on Celibacy

Books often change the course of one's life. I have experienced this in my childhood. Two books that I had borrowed from a library had made a great impact on my mind. One was Feeroz Davar's *Reflection on Death* and the other was *Deliberation on Celibacy.* The second book helped me to cure many boys of that vice. In *Deliberation on Celibacy* it was stated that one drop of semen is produced from forty drops of blood. I had no idea of the scientific validity of the fact but it had made a great impression on me at that time. I had not been much influenced by books before. I had not read the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* or the Gita. The only time I had a chance to listen to these texts was during the month of Shravan (mid-July to mid-August) when a reading of these texts was arranged in the moholla. I would then sing in a loud voice the words learnt in parrot-like manner:

> 'Then the wise sage Vaishyampayan said,
> Listen O King Janmejaya,
> I'll narrate in detail the greatness of this mighty epic.'

Though I had heard and recited this tale as a child it had failed to have much impact on my life. But *Deliberation on Celibacy* opened my eyes. I learnt from this book how to enrich my blood and to save every drop of semen. I tried hard to increase and conserve semen. In our community, marriages were arranged at a very young age, really, when we were children. As I have already mentioned, I had got engaged when I was very young, but it had to be called off. Then in 1964 at the age of twenty-four I got married. As I faced a

lot of difficulties managing a job and cooking my own food, the *aanu*, the ceremony of bringing the bride to her father-in-law's house, was arranged just after two years in 1966.

The older boys of the moholla used to prescribe boda ghokhru, a kind of cactus, for enriching semen. So whenever I went to the fields to collect wood or cow-dung I would look for this cactus. I would eat the tender thorns of this plant, and bring the leaves home and soak them in water. The water would turn thick and sticky after a while and this I used to drink. Ma once saw the soaked leaves but she did not say anything. But when Pitaji saw this he asked about it though he knew the reason. I remember I had replied, feeling shy: 'It improves health.'

He also once found me reading *Deliberation on Celibacy*. He picked up the book and browsed through few pages and commented: 'It's an interesting idea but very difficult to achieve.'

At that time I did not understand the meaning of his words.

A good physique requires nutritious food, which I never received. We never consumed any ghee. I used to eat khichri with either sesame seed oil or peanut oil, and when even this was not available with onion or green chillies or just plain dry khichri. Sheera would be made only for special guests like the children's parents-in-law. Even at such times the amount of ghee bought was just sufficient for that special dish. Sometimes I used to crumble bajra roti in sesame oil and then add jaggery to it and eat it. It was absolutely delicious. I was never given any milk when I was growing up. I remember once I wanted to eat shrikhand but I had barely managed to save one anna. When I gave it to the sweatmeat vendor, he gave a spoonful in a small bowl. I remember it was garnished with chironji nuts and this was my first taste of the nut and shrikhand. Whenever I passed a long line of sweet shops I used to marvel at the variety of sweets displayed there and used to wonder as a child who were those lucky people who got to eat these. I had never tasted dry fruits like almonds or cashew nuts. I remember walnuts and dry figs were cheap then and were sold in open carts, but I had never eaten any of these. Only once when I was in the second standard, I remember my mother had made a small bowl of a special sweet with ghee and almonds for me, because she had

heard that almonds improved memory. Was this the reason then, why I had good memory? Or maybe because I used to eat white shankhapushpi flowers whenever I went to the fields. These are supposed to enhance memory. There were many home remedies in the moholla. If a child did not learn to walk at the right time, a special sweet made from sugarcane juice was ordered from Patan. My father had ordered it for my younger brother who learnt to walk late.

Around this time, I also started learning wrestling in the akhada—the open gymnasium. Dashratbhai Suthar was considered a good wrestler and he had won many awards. I started my lessons under him. I had to wear a loincloth, rub soil on my bare body and then wrestle. I particularly liked the washerman's move in wrestling. Sometimes when I used it on a boy in school, he, poor thing, would cry out loudly. I also learnt to do gymnastics on the wooden pole called malkhamb. For this I had to apply oil on my body and then I would cling to the pole upside down with my feet up and head down. I learnt to do different kinds of exercise on the single bar and double bars, and I could even hang and swing from a ring with my feet holding the ring and head down. I did this because this exercise is supposed to aid in gaining good height and I did have a good height. In the gymnasium, besides weight lifting, I used dumb bells and leizim (bowlike implement with chains) to build my body. Push-ups and sprinting were routine matters. In school the common games were langdi—trying to catch others by hopping on one leg—khokho and kabbadi, which we played two to three times a week. After school I had to do hard labour, which meant hard physical exercise. Walking was of course a part of my life. I do not remember ever using any public transport in Ahmedabad. The habit of waking up early, being in the fresh air of the fields where I spent a lot of time, and a body built on hard labour and exercise made me so fit that even though I did not get nutritious food, my complexion had a healthy copper tinge and my cheeks were red. In all these years I've never known stomach ache or headache. It is only now that I have started feeling minor aches and pains of the joints; I think I now have to pay the price for all that hard labour of my childhood days. Running with heavy baskets on my head has now resulted in pain in the knee and ankle, especially during winter. Once when I had

consulted an orthopaedic doctor he had said, 'Your kneecaps have worn out. It's not possible to replace them, so you need to do some exercise.' In the past, I exercised to build my body, and now I shall have to exercise to maintain it! In the old days, I had worked extensively on my bones but not a single one of those bones will be of any use now!

Once I was unwell; the illness was just a fever. But until then I had never had any serious illness, and the fever continued for a long time, almost a month. Though I never considered fever to be a serious illness, its duration surprised me. Finally I was forced to consult a doctor. But the medicine he had prescribed did not help. Pitaji commented, 'Some woman must have thrown a spell on you!' My robust physique must have prompted him to say this.

There was no apparent reason for the fever to continue, and I too went about my work without heeding it. One day I was returning from Vadodara by train. When the train left the station I took out a book and started to read. The compartment was crowded and so the person next to me was almost touching me. He could feel the heat of my body and when he found me reading, he turned to me and said: 'Have you had a drink?'

I was taken aback. Why had he asked this question? My breath did not smell of alcohol and I never drank so how could he smell alcohol? I immediately replied: 'I never drink,' and immediately I opened my mouth for him to check. I wanted to assure him that I had not had a drink. Then I asked him, 'Why did you ask me such a question?'

He replied, 'You've been reading from the time you boarded the train at Vadodara. Your body is hot and so I thought that you must have had a drink or two.'

'I've fever that's all.' And once again I was lost in my book.

Pitaji had even consulted our relative Purshottambhai about my fever. He could not get rid of the idea of some girl having cast a spell over me. Around this time four girls who were in my school came to visit me; one was a bania, two were brahmins and the fourth a Patel. I said so to Pitaji when he asked about them. Because Pitaji associated a girl with my fever, he asked Purshottambhai to consult somebody. I had no faith in black magic so when Purshottambhai informed me about Pitaji's concern

I emphatically dissuaded him from any such enquiries. He tried to reason with me, 'But what's the harm in finding out? Then it's up to you to do anything about it.'

I was still adamant and refused to comply with any such enquiry. My fever continued. Purshottambhai too wanted to consult somebody more knowledgeable on this matter. One night after dinner we two were taking a stroll when he turned towards the Muslim kasba. I asked him, 'Why did you take this road? Do you have any work there?'

'Today let us walk this way.' He replied. I did not mind and this is how without telling me he took me to Mr. Munshi's house. Mr. Munshi taught at a municipal school in Ahmedabad. Did Purshottambhai appraise him about my condition and also about my ideas on the subject? Did he practise witchcraft? I was a bit baffled. He looked at me and chatted for sometime, and then informed Purshottambhai, 'Nothing serious, he must have mocked sometime at the offering made to the household deity.'

Purshottambhai laughed and asked me to think of any such incident. I too could not control my laughter and tried to recall if I had done any such thing. Then I remembered that once when Ma was making an offering of cooked rice to Mahakali Mataji I had given her a long sermon and had tried to dissuade her from observing such ridiculous rites. Ma had been outraged and had reprimanded me, 'Come, come listen to this know-all. Don't interfere with irreverent talk and disturb Mataji's work.'

As I was saying, in those days I was possessed with the idea of building my body. I believed that a healthy body meant a healthy mind and a healthy mind ensured healthy life. Hence I used to work hard with my limited resources to keep fit. I had read that eggs have plenty of vitamins and protein but one had to have vitamin M (money) to buy. I had never been given any pocket money when I was in school. During the break other boys would buy sweets, toffees, and ice-fruits and I would watch them eat. Only when some relatives visited us, especially if they were from Ma's side, they would sometimes give me a paisa or two. Sometimes I managed to coax some amount of mony from

my parents. I would collect all the money and buy an egg. One of my higher caste friends also ate eggs but he could not eat in his house. He had plenty of money so he would often ask me to buy eggs. Then he used to go inside a toilet of a railway carriage and eat them raw.

21. In High School

I successfully passed the seventh standard from a government Gujarati-medium school. Abhimanyu had died in the seventh battle formation but I won the seventh formation successfully. There was a feeling of exhilaration when I stepped inside the High School because for someone like me who could not dream of completing primary education it was a rare achievement to come to the eighth standard. My good academic record in High School had made me popular with everyone. All the teachers and the principal knew me and liked me. I had beautiful handwriting so every day I was asked to write 'the thought for the day' and important news on the main blackboard. I wrote with different coloured chalks, and I also drew attractive designs around the writing. Students loved these messages. I took a lot of pains to collect the sayings of the great thinkers of the world. To do this I had to read a lot and this habit in turn helped me a great deal.

I participated in all the competitive events held in school, and won prizes in story-writing and essay writing. I remember I received a volume of collected stories of Chunilal Madia called *Ghughawata Pur* (Rushing Flood) as a prize in one of the contests. I took part in drama and spoke well in elocution competitions. When I was in the matriculation class I was studying in Dharmanagar School in Sabarmati. I won the first prize in the school's elocution

competition and represented my school in the Ahmedabad District High School elocution competition.

I was an enthusiastic participant in every school function. On Teacher's Day I would take classes. Once when I was in the ninth standard and was teaching a history lesson, I found some of the teachers listening intently just outside the window. I was talking about the enmity between the Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb and the Maratha leader Shivaji. I told a joke related to them in the class and the students had burst out laughing. I could crack good jokes at that time. This particular one was: Once Aurangzeb wanted to insult Shivaji and so he had hung his photograph in the lavatory. This news reached the Maratha king. He had to give an appropriate reply because if he did not react then it would mean that he had accepted this insult. Shivaji deliberated for some time and then he sent out the news that Aurangzeb was suffering from constipation and had difficulty in his bowel movement. He was so terrified of Shivaji that looking at his picture in his lavatory he promptly defecated.

I was fond of singing at that time. I used to lead the prayers in primary school. I remember there was another boy with a surname Bhand who lived in the Railway Quarters. He too led the prayers at times. I still remember the song, 'O dear Lord, we pray to you . . .'

I also made the class say tables before the actual studies started. I enjoyed the game of anthakshari: singing competition. I was an expert in singing sad and painful songs as after all I had been born and brought up in pain, I had played with pain and had dressed my body in pain. Pain was so deep inside me that even on happy occasions I had tears in my eyes. People called these tears of joy. But then is not the other name for tears pain?

Once our class went to a picnic at a Shiva Temple at Pavathi. We went inside the temple and paid obeisance to the idol of lord Shiva. I, too, watching others, placed my hands on Nandi, the bull and then touched my eyes. I saw that the Shivalinga was covered with flowers and bilva leaves, and it was continuously being drenched by drops of water falling from a vessel hung above it. The water then drained out through an outlet shaped like a cow's head. I also had the prasad of panjira. Nobody had stopped

me from going inside because I had gone in a group. Had I entered alone then somebody would have asked my caste and then I would have had to leave the temple right at its steps. Perhaps I would have had to listen to some curses as well.

I had a great time playing the singing game of antakshari, cards and play ring and yet somewhere deep down I had this constant fear of being recognized. It hurt me deeply. We were served a good meal. There were laddus and we all sat together to eat. We were all laughing and having a great time. Some boys told jokes. On everyone's insistence I too narrated a few jokes and made them laugh. I did not understand at that time why I was so interested in jokes. After so many years, especially after doing some reading in psychology, I now understand. It was the only device I had to forget the hurt inside me!

The food had been very good, and so all had eaten their fill, greatly appreciating the meal. Once the meal was over I heaved a sigh of relief. Everybody got up to throw the leaf plates. I followed them. We had to throw the plates in a pit next to the road. A group of beggars around the pit were collecting the leftovers from the plates. Some of the children of these beggars stood by and ate the leftover food from the plates. When I threw my plate in the pit, one of the beggar women rushed to collect it. Suddenly she looked at me and recognized me. She threw my plate as if it were a live wire or filled with poison and cried out, 'Hai, hai he's a dhhed . . .' I just stared at her. Even at that time I had wondered how I could be lower than this illiterate beggar woman. I had known her and seen her often smoking beedis. How many such immoral acts she must have committed! She was illiterate and yet from which school did she acquire this knowledge?

22. A Meeting with Ravishankar Maharaj

When I was in the eighth standard at P. J. Vakharia School, the great social reformer Ravishankar Maharaj visited Kalol. He had come with many of his fellow workers, and they had all been put up at our school. Many people, including leaders from the nearby villages, came to meet him. The place had turned into a big fair ground. I had heard about Vinoba's Bhudan movement and knew that Ravishankar Maharaj was trying to improve the condition of the people of Khakharia Tappa. I had read Jhaverchand Meghani's famous *Mansaina Diva* where he had narrated different incidents in the life of Ravishankar Maharaj. He had cited many examples, describing how he had brought about remarkable change in the lives of innumerable people he came in contact with. I went to meet him one morning. Maharajshri was meeting everyone individually. I was the youngest person among all those who had come to visit him, so the person who was in charge of organizing these meetings had a surprised look on his face. When my turn came I asked him, 'Did the incidents narrated in *Mansaina Diva* really happen?'

He looked at me for sometime and then replied, 'What do you think?'

I had my answer and there was nothing more to ask. Moreover, there were many people after me waiting to meet him so I came back. When my friends came to know about this meeting they started questioning me about it, 'Did you really meet Ravishankar Maharaj? What did you ask him?'

I had another opportunity to meet him many years later. This happened when I was a mamlatdar in Dholka. One day I received a telephone call from the office of the collector of Ahmedabad, 'Ravishankar Maharaj is at his Dhandhuka Ashram. Please accompany him and reach Raj Bhavan as early as possible.'

At that time, Shrimannarayan was the governor of Gujarat and Hitendrabhai Desai the chief minister. On that day the swearing-in ceremony of the cabinet of ministers was to take place and the latter wanted Ravishankar Maharaj to bless the occasion. I left immediately in a car for Dhandhuka and when I reached its outskirts I saw him approaching in a jeep from the opposite side. I stopped the jeep and gave him the message. He said he had received the message and was proceeding towards Ahmedabad. I took him in my car and we went straight to Raj Bhavan.

After the function, I accompanied Maharajshri to meet the governor and his wife, Madalasaben. I was to take him back to Dhandhuka so Madalasaben said to me, 'Take care of him.'

I started with him for Dhandhuka. After Bavala when we were approaching Bhayala we met with a minor mishap. A small boy suddenly ran onto the road. The driver tried to steer away but could not help hitting the boy. The boy started to shout and a large crowd gathered and began to blame the driver. They threatened to call the police. I got down from the car and tried to pacify them. Maharajshri lost his temper and said, 'It was the boy's fault and not the driver's. You let loose your children on the road and then blame the driver!'

When the driver informed the people that the people in the car were Ravishankar Maharaj and the mamlatdar of Dholka taluka they calmed down. In any case, the boy was not seriously hurt and they took him back to the village. We once again started for Dhandhuka. Maharajshri told me on the way, 'These people do this to get money.'

That was my first visit to the Raj Bhavan in Ahmedabad. At a later stage in my life I was posted there as the comptroller of household to the governor of Gujarat during the terms of Her Excellency Shrimati Sharada Mukerjee, Their Excellencies Shri R. K. Trivedi, Shri Mahipalsingh Shastri, and Shri Swaroop Singh. While I was posted there I had the opportunity to meet Indira

Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, President Venkataraman, and Vice President R. K. Narayanan. The only regret I have is that I never had a chance in my life to meet Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

23. First Position

When I was in the standard ninth a small miracle happened in my life. That year I had given up hope of maintaining my first position in the class. Every year when I stood first in the class I received a lot of attention not only from my school but also from everyone in the moholla. My parents had never bothered much about my studies. In fact they were often surprised at my excellent results because I used to do all the household work, errands, wash my clothes and yet came first in class. But when I was in the ninth standard I faced certain odds. My kaka's wedding took place in the middle of my annual examination and I had to go with the jaan, the bridegroom's party, to Ahmedabad. The wedding festivities went on for the entire night and so I could not sleep. The next morning I caught the 5 o'clock local to reach Kalol. Our moholla was at the other end of the town, quite far from the railway station. It took me almost half an hour to get home, and then I bathed and went straight to sit for the examination. I had not read anything the previous night, and I usually worked very hard on the day before the exam. I wrote whatever I could but was not satisfied with my performance. That evening Baldev forced me to accompany him to a late night movie from nine to twelve. Having gone without sleep for the wedding, followed by another late night, I could not do well in my second paper. Then I gave up

all hope of my retaining first position and wrote the papers for the sake of just clearing them. There was a very bright girl named Sarla in my class. Everybody spoke of how hard she had been working to secure the first position in the class.

Finally, it was time for the results to be announced. When the class teacher entered the class my heartbeats increased. Would I miss my first position this year? The teacher called out my name and said I stood first among all the students in the class. The boys in the class clapped very loudly. I had retained my honour. If a girl had secured the first position then the boys would have felt humiliated. They were elated that a 'boy' and not a 'girl' had come first in the class and the applause went on for quite sometime. This had been possible entirely due to my extra reading. I always read and referred to books other than the prescribed textbooks. I used to read at any odd place. I would stand and read while travelling in crowded buses or trains. As a child I used to pick up any scrap of paper and read it. In speaking of my eagerness to read, I recall an incident from my childhood which occurred when I was in the first standard. At that time we could not go to a barber's shop to get a haircut. Someone called Senmabhai would give me a haircut. Once after he had finished with me he started to read the Gujarati daily, *Sandesh*. I too sat next to him and started to read. I remember it was a Sunday and so the newspaper carried the title in bold letters '*Sandesh–Raviwarni Purti*' (*Sandesh*–The Sunday Supplement). At that time I had not learnt to read the *ref*–the sign that looked like a vertical half-moon–on top of a letter denoting a half-consonant in Gujarati. So I was stumped by the word 'Purti'. I did not know that the *ref* on letter 't' meant the sound 'r' and so I was reading 'Purti' as 'Puti'. Somehow it did not sound right and I felt there was something amiss about the word. In the end, I showed the word to Senmabhai and asked him to pronounce it. He read it aloud to me and I understood where I was making a mistake. He also knew why I had asked him to read aloud. He then explained in detail about *ref* in Gujarati. I learnt on that day that it was important to question and get doubts cleared to learn something new.

I was always made the class monitor because I was good in studies. Once a girl went out of the classroom after a session. When she came back after a while she stood at the door and asked,

'May I come in?'

I replied, 'No.'

The girl had a shocked look on her face. I said, 'Did you take my permission to go out of the class?'

She stood there and started to cry. I then said, 'Well now you can come in. But henceforth don't go out without seeking permission.'

She entered the class, went to her desk but continued to cry sitting on her bench. When the class teacher came in she stopped crying, but the teacher's alert eyes could detect that something was amiss. After class, I went up to him in the staff room and told him what had happened. I added that she might come to complain about me and he said shortly that she could do so.

That girl's father was a well-known lawyer in Kalol. Everybody in the class thought that she would bring her father to school the next day. But nothing of the kind happened and gradually everybody forgot about this incident. When I secured the first position beating all the girls in the class she was the only girl who came to congratulate me. Another time I was busy teaching maths to some eight or ten students, sitting under a tree at some distance from school. When the bell rang for the school to commence I was in the middle of a sum. Others were getting anxious about missing class. After I had solved the sum we went to the class. We were late and the teacher was very angry. I apologized on behalf of the group and asked if we could come in. He refused and as the other boys were anxious, I tried to explain why we were late. But he stopped me and said, 'I don't want to hear anything. Go and get the principal's permission.'

I saw that he was very angry and would not let us in without the principal's permission. I asked the other boys to come along to the principal's office. His office was on the first floor and as we were going up the stairs, we found the vice principal Mr. Patel coming down the stairs. He was busy taking snuff, and when he saw so many of us together, he stopped us and asked, 'Alya, why are you loitering outside?'

The vice principal had known me since the time I had acted as Pestonji in the play *Padho Popatji*. I told him what had happened.

He then replied, 'All right, all right, now don't do this again. Go back to your class and tell your teacher you have talked to me. I'll be there in a short while as I am taking a round.'

We went back to our class and once again I requested the teacher to pardon us and asked if we could come in. He immediately came to the door. I told him of what the vice principal had said and he allowed us in but only after a serious rebuke. As soon as the class was over others gathered around and started questioning us. In those days students did not go on strike at any small pretext, and teachers too ensured that strict discipline was maintained.

When I was in the final year of the primary school, that is, in the seventh standard, Madhubhai Barot had organized special classes for us. At the end of the year we decided to give him a gift at the farewell function. We had decided on a gift collectively but the class monitor bought a gift of his choice. From the moholla Kanti and I used to attend these classes. We decided to oppose this change of gift. We had no objection to buying a different gift but we felt that all the students should have been informed and consulted about it. We worked very hard to get everyone to agree on this matter. Some students came from other villages so we decided to contact all of them. We walked all the way to Sahij village and met the boys and got their consent. I visited homes of all the boys in Borisana. The girls were also contacted. We explained the situation to them and they all agreed to cooperate with us. Finally, we went to the monitor who had bought the gift. But he refused to give in. Thus, when no way out could be found we met Mr. Barot. He heard us out and expressed his sympathy, but in the end the entire farewell function had to be cancelled.

While organizing the farewell function of Madhubhai Barot I fell in love with one of my classmates—a brahmin girl. Today she is a grandmother and lives happily with her family. I do not want to cause any embarrassment to her or her family and so I have decided to call her Kunjbala here. She was one of the girls I had visited when I was trying to organize the farewell function. When we reached the eighth standard we became close friends. I would visit her home often and gradually got to know her parents, two sisters

and a brother. Once I remember we stood talking near her staircase for almost an hour. Her father had seen us chatting on his way to the market and when he returned after an hour he was surprised to see me still there. I even remember that he had commented: 'Haven't you left yet?'

24. In Chhatral

After studying for the eighth and the ninth standards in Kalol's P. J. Vakharia School, many of us joined the newly opened Bharat High School. The school had not been recognized till then, so we were admitted to the Jhaveri High School in the neighbouring village of Chhatral. In the outskirts of Chhatral there was a huge banyan tree, which was known as Babra Bhut's Vad: the Babra Ghost's Banyan Tree. It was believed to be the residence of Babra Ghost and people had built a small dehri in its honour.Under the shade of the large spreading tree people waited for buses' arrival and departure. We were in Chhatral's school for six months, but we never chanced upon this ghost or even felt its presence. The truth is: stories of this kind are passed on from one generation to another irrespective of the presence of any spirit. I am sure even today people are scared to go under that tree at night.

Every day I walked from Kalol to Chhatral to attend school. I do not recall ever going by train though all my fellow students commuted by train. The day I worked at the mill I used to miss school. Standing close to the mill's compound wall, I would watch the train carrying my friends to Chhatral. At times I jumped over the wall and stood very close to the rail tracks and waved out to them. They would in turn shout my name.

Sometimes after school some of the boys accompanied me back to Kalol. While walking back we used to pass by my friend Amthalal Patel's farm. Amthalal was then known as Amtho Patel. He was my best friend and though his parents practised untouchability they were kind to me. Every member of his family loved me dearly but I do not remember ever being offered a glass of water; food, of course, was unthinkable. Amathabhai used to frequent Chhatral so he would often walk along with me. On Saturdays we had morning school and sometimes other boys joined me on my return journey home. Not used to walking such a distance, many would get tired and so we would stop midway for a rest at a place that had a *parabdi* where a woman gave water to thirsty travellers. This woman knew me so she would always pour water from a height into my cupped hands, whereas others would drink from a glass. I earnestly wished that she had not known me, then I would not have had to face such a humiliation. She behaved in this manner only because she knew me. I am sure if one of the dogs that loitered around that lonely cool place were to piss on her earthen jar, she would not throw the water out and walk the long distance to fetch fresh water again. And those who would not know about the incident would happily drink water from that jar.

On our way we passed a pond full of water chestnuts. We would get into the water, pull the creeper and pluck the fruits. Once when we were in the water we saw a snake and after that the boys refused to go into the pond. But Amtha and I feared nothing and we would gather the fruits and share these with the others, eating them raw. Of course we were very careful while pulling the creepers after we had sighted the snake. Maybe that is why nobody picked water chestnuts from that pond, or maybe because Amatha and I looked like the Babra Ghost, the sight of us drove the snake into hiding! Then one day we saw a snake on the banks of the pond. After this incident the boys refused to go anywhere near the pond. From that time onwards Amtha and I had a great time eating water chestnuts all by ourselves. One day when I was walking from the pond towards Amtha's farm I saw a huge cobra near a hedge. At that time I did not know that cobras and I would form a long association. When I was posted in Raj Bhavan I often spotted a cobra. When I was in Dholka a cobra suddenly fell in the middle

of the inner courtyard of our house and had hidden in the kitchen. In Palanpur on the third day of our stay we saw one pass by our compound wall with its hood raised. I even had dreams of cobras in different sizes and colours. One of my friends had remained in an unconscious state for three days after a snake had twined around his neck. When I was posted at Gandhinagar I visited the Gir Foundation, and one of the employees placed a huge python around my neck. I still recall the cold feel of the snake around my neck. The elders of our community said that snakes protect farms, and they are the ancestors of the present owners. The snake that followed Mangabhai and I when we had trespassed on a farm to collect dates must have been one!

Amtha's farm had different crops at different seasons. When it was the season for jowar, I would break a stem and chew it like a sugarcane stick. Sometimes I ate green fennel, and when there was cotton crop in the field, I would eat the tender cotton pods. The farm also grew various beans and I loved the taste of tender yard beans. But all this I did without the knowledge of either Amtha's brother or his parents. Once we had gathered in his farm to eat water chestnuts, which Amtha had collected from the pond and boiled, all ready to eat. On that occasion the girls had joined our picnic. Kunjbala was also there and we had a great time.

In Chhatral we often sat on the culvert facing the Babra Ghost's banyan tree. Kunjbala often came with other girls from my class and joined our group here. I remember once she had refused to accompany us back to Kalol and only when I had pulled her up by her hand she reluctantly got up. This was in 1957-58 when it was unthinkable for boys and girls even to talk to each other. My action had amazed my friends. Another time there had been some tiff among the girls and as a result one of the girls had come to the culvert in an angry mood. I remember my friend Bansilal Soni and I spent a long time consoling her.

This culvert is deeply etched in my memory and the reason for it was something different. Chhatral was not very far from my house; in fact I often visited it in search of firewood and dung. Once I remember I had picked up a clod thinking it to be dung and it turned out to be dog shit. Dogs used to lie around this culvert because it was shady. My hand stank and there was no

water anywhere and anyway, who would give water to *me*? I rubbed my hands on the ground and dried them with sand. I wiped my hands clean with leaves of the banyan tree. I am sure even the Babra Ghost must have been taken by surprise!

Around this time a story-writing competition was held in our school, and I was given the first prize for my story '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*'. My Gujarati teacher, Mr. Vaghela, who was from the Rajput caste, had liked the story immensely. But some others did not appreciate it. They thought it to be vulgar. A teacher even advised me not to write such stories in my student days. There was a difference of opinion about giving the first prize to my story. But finally I did get the first prize and I was overjoyed. And when it was published in a magazine called *Chandni* (moonlight) my happiness knew no bounds. It was on Mr. Vaghela's suggestion—he had liked its style in particular—that I had sent it to *Chandni*, a well-known short story magazine of that time. When it came out in the June issue of 1959 it led to a heated discussion among the readers and writers, almost similar to the kind that had happened in school, which continued for six months among the readers and writers in the columns called 'Open Door' and 'Discussion Thugs'. Even today I recall how one reader from Nadiad had written that if *Chandni* were to publish such stories then it should change its name to 'Darkness'. This discussion came to an end when finally the editor Ashok Harsh commented in *Chandarvo* that he considered it to be 'a complete short story'. I also recall that when I was in Chhatral School another short story writer—Dilipbhai Roy—was a teacher in that school. I had been completely overwhelmed by the long debate that my story, written at such a young age, had generated. After this I had an opportunity to meet Ashokbhai.

Many people were puzzled by the title of the story and would ask me the meaning of 'redness of red *rayan*'. In villages the term '*rati rayan*' is used to describe a beautiful woman. Once when I was working with my mother in the mill she was talking about a particular beautiful woman and she said,'In the entire moholla there is not a single woman as pretty as her—she is like a golden rayan.'

Though this term refers to the beauty of a woman I had used it in my story to denote her anger. Anger causes a person to turn

red and the redness of a crimson rayan means the anger of a beautiful woman. To describe her beauty I had used the term coined, as I have already stated, by my friend Magan: 'quartered moon'. In this story a wayside Romeo teases a woman and she gets angry. The story was written in the dialect used by the dalits and had the ring of truth in it because it was based on a true story. When I was in the eighth standard, one of my friends named Shrimali had told me about this incident. My story's protagonist, Keshli, challenges the man, 'Marry me and make me your wife or suckle my breast and call me mother out of shame.'

This was her righteous indignation and so the glow of the crimson rayan. Ashokbhai had made the following comment while discussing the story in *Chandarvo*, 'It is a tale of the feminine indignation of a firebrand woman.'

At the time of the struggle for reservation in Gujarat, I remember a photograph of a dalit woman labourer from Ahmedabad district that had appeared in a local daily. It had shown her bending down to pick a stone to throw at the group of attackers. I was reminded of the character of Keshli from '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*'. In that dalit woman I had perceived the same firebrand woman's indignation. Around this time I also received a letter from Mohanlal Patel, the principal of Kadi Sarva Vidyalay, congratulating me on my story that he had read in *Chandni*. I had never met him and I wanted to and so decided to visit Kadi. As I did not have the money to buy a railway ticket, I walked along the railway tracks from Kalol all the way to Kadi, crossing such stations on the way like Chhatral, Ankhol, Karannagar, and so on. The school was right opposite the Kadi Railway station, and when I met Mr. Patel he was astonished to know that I had walked such a distance. I spent a good time discussing literature with him. His stories at that time were published in magazines like *Chandni* and *Savita*, and I remember that he had shown me the press copy of the manuscript of his novel *Antim Deep*. I was very excited to see this manuscript. Though I was not a writer at that time, my story had helped me to come in contact with such literary figures, and the joy of meeting them was something that I had never experienced before.

After my meeting with Mohanlal Patel, I faced the question of returning home. I did not have any money on me. Even in the

direst situation when I had nothing to eat, I had not asked anyone for help and had slept on an empty stomach. But on that day I was so tired after the long walk that I was not in a position to think of returning on foot. I boarded the train without buying a ticket. At every station I would get down and get into a coach where there was no ticket checker. This I would do when the train had started to leave the station. This way I reached Ankhol. But this time, trying to avoid the ticket checker, I got down from the coach in a hurry and against the direction of the speed of the train. In doing so I fell and as I was holding on to the handle I was dragged for some distance. I barely managed not to come under the train. Here too some unknown power seemed to have saved my life! A large crowd of passengers had gathered around me but I was so scared of the ticket checker that I got up hurriedly, dusted my clothes and to escape the crowd I boarded the coach and got down from the other side. As I was getting down I heard, 'Saved just in time, poor chap, he would have fallen under the train.'

As a rule, while getting down from a running train one should get down facing the engine, keeping pace with the speed of the train. But I had never had the experience of getting down from a running train and so I had made that dangerous mistake. I even heard someone cry out, 'Look someone's . . . being dragged'. But fortunately I tumbled on the side of the platform away from the tracks and was saved. Now absolutely terrified, I somehow reached Chhatral from Ankhol but I realized that it was very risky to travel from Chhatral to Kalol without a ticket. I could not even go out of the station and so I decided to walk along the railway tracks and before Kalol station approached I left the tracks and reached home. I had gone on foot and I returned on foot.

25. In Bharat High School

Once Bharat High School received the recognition from the School Board, we left Chhatral's Jhaveri High School and went back to Kalol. A peon's post was vacant in the school and as I needed a job very badly, I requested the principal of the school, Dundbhai Ghanchi, and my teacher Manubhai Nayak for the post. I explained to them that if I did not get the post I would have to leave my studies and I wanted to continue with my schooling. Finally, I was accepted and I was able to continue my studies. I reached school very early to clean the office and the classrooms, fill the drinking water jugs, and do all other work that was assigned to me. Both Dundbhai and Manubhai were satisfied with my work, and they always encouraged and supported me. One day Ganchisaheb asked me to fill his fountain pen. When I was trying to pour the ink into the pen, I dropped the inkpot. The bottle broke and all the ink spilled on the floor and splashed on the wall. I was petrified with fear and was sure that Ganchisaheb would be very angry with me. But he just looked at me and said, 'It's all right. You did not do it deliberately. Go clean up the place.'

I picked up the pieces of glass and cleaned up the place. Though I was at fault, Ganchisaheb did not scold me; instead he showed a great deal of consideration. After this episode it was as if caution and meticulousness entered my bloodstream and became a part of my work ethic.

Very close to this school, there were butcher shops which sold mutton. Many people came to buy meat there. Very few dalits visited the place because how many of them could afford this

expensive meat! I remember the occasion when meat would be bought in a moholla family: only when somebody was very ill. The family would buy liver for the person and give him liver soup. This soup was not the kind that is served in restaurants The dalit soup was a stock of meat and liver. Liver was believed to restore strength in a weak person. Sometimes an ill person was also given mutton and liver curry. I befriended many butchers when I was in the High School and spent many hours talking to them about various issues. I watched them using their huge meat knives and at times when they used two knives to cut meat I remember it created quite a racket. The knives were so sharp that they could even cut bones. Huge chunks of meat were hung on a piece of rope and they lighted incense, perhaps to cover the foul smell.

One day I came to school early and found that one of the butchers was mercilessly beating up a woman from the Thakore community. Though she was kicked and beaten so badly the woman did not utter a sound. When I came close to them I found that she was the mother of a boy I knew in school. Her son used to study with me in the Gujarati School. He had lost his father and his mother did sundry jobs. My heart cried out to see a mother in such a condition. My mind was in a turmoil trying to figure out answers to many questions that crowded my mind. Why was she here? Why was he beating her up? Did she borrow money from him and was not able to repay him?

Once there was an elocution competition in school. The theme was: 'There should be no discrimination on the basis of colour'. Many students had spoken beautifully with thought-provoking comments on the issue. I had also participated in the competition. Even today I can recall the words of my short and precise speech: 'How can I speak on discrimination on the basis of colour in a land where people discriminate on the basis of caste? Why should I comment on something that doesn't concern us?'

I am sure many would have felt offended by my speech but maybe there were some who appreciated it, who knows! But when I was in college I wrote a short story on this theme called, 'Advising the Foolish'. I had written: 'It is like the case of the wise girl refusing to go to her parents-in-law's house and counselling the foolish one to do so.' The editor of *Lokveena*

had liked the story very much and had published it. I had even received a prize of Rs.40 and I remember getting overjoyed on that occasion.

The work of rural development was being carried out in the state through different block offices. The persons in charge of these blocks were called the block development officers (BDOs). Mrs. Pradhan was then the BDO of Kalol. Once a group of students from our school visited a village in this connection and I was in this group. We had to study the condition of village people and to do this we were divided into groups, each taking up one locality. I was assigned the dalit moholla. The dalit houses were built in a row but as these were in the rural area there was a lot of open space between the two rows. It was afternoon and some of the dalits were seated on charpoys under a tree. I went up to them and discussed their day-to-day problems. When I broached the topic of untouchability I understood that for them untouchability and the resulting helplessness, the contempt, and insults of society had become a part of their existence.When I tried to discuss the economic issues with them, an old man turned to me and said, 'For us the situation is like if we have salt then we don't have chillies and if we have chillies then we don't have salt!'

Salt and chillies are the basic ingredients in our food, and the old man's spontaneously uttered words got etched in my mind. While I was busy talking to them, the panchayat peon came to call me for lunch. Our Hindi teacher, Dineshbhai Pandya, was from this village, and so he had organized this trip. The panchayat had made arrangements for our lunch and I remember we were served basudi. But when I sat down for lunch the words of that old man echoed in my ears and I started to fiddle with my food. Seeing me eat so slowly another student called Pravinbhai, who was also from the same village, commented, 'What's bothering you? Aren't you hungry? Or you have lost your appetite because it's so late?' And suddenly the following words slipped from my mouth: 'My hunger has died. I've no appetite.' For years I could not forget the words of that old man. Finally when I was in college, I wrote a story on this theme. It was published in *Lokveena* and it carried the title 'Hunger Has Died'.

Meanwhile Kunjbala and I were always together. She would always support me. Once when she defended me on some issue, one of my classmates at Chhatral School bluntly said, 'Why don't you become his?' I also accompanied Kunjbala and her mother once from Kalol to Ahmedabad and at one station when she tried to pay for some snacks I held her hand and did not let her pay. Her mother just stared at us. After reaching Ahmedabad we separated. I stayed with my elder brother and spent long hours near the Kankaria Lake pining for her. When I returned home to Kalol after three days her letter was waiting for me. Pitaji handed the letter saying:'Bhai, the letter was in your name so we did not open it.'

One look at the writing and I knew it was from Kunjbala. I sat near the back window of the house and read the letter dripping in affection where she had described how much she missed me. I was in a similar state. This was my first love letter. I did not send any reply to her letter then.

Both of us felt very deeply for each other but we knew our love would never end in a permanent relationship. She showed a lot of courage by falling in love with me and would have readily married me. In fact she even visited the dalit moholla and came to my house and said: 'I've come to see your house.' She showed a deep concern for me and my family. But the gap that divided us through the caste status was too wide to bridge. Also financially I was not in a position to add another member to the family that I was supporting at a great cost. The people of her neighbourhood could easily destroy the moholla by burning down our houses.

At a time when untouchability was rampant and it was not possible for the dalits to get a haircut in the market place, or to play drums in their moholla, we met without giving thoughts to such taboos. Had we tried to go a step further, I would have had to pay with my life. Newspapers were full of stories of the killings of dalits. I also had the constant worry for my parents and siblings. What would happen to them if I died? Such an action would also mean closure of doors to further studies. Though we did not lack courage, we were aware of the ruinous consequence of our action on the two families. I continued to work and study and she accepted a job after matriculation.

I replied to her letter in 1964 after I had got married. I stated in my letter:

> 'We had never discussed the prospect of marriage because we knew it was impossible.
>
> I did not propose to you and neither did you. Gradually our meetings became infrequent but our love for each other has not diminished. In the rare occasion when we saw each other we parted with a heavy heart. Now I have got married to Bharti. She is prettier than you and loves me ardently. Suddenly I have a great desire to see you. Could we meet?'

She replied promptly. Her letter was full of tender feelings and she said she was working and invited me to her house. She wrote: 'Please do come or I'll feel very offended.' I immediately applied for leave from my job at Nadiad and went to meet her. I stayed with her for two days. We talked, went to a movie and to my surprise though she had not met Bharti she had warm feelings for her.

I preserved the two letters that I had received from Kunjbala till Bharti came to live with me. Then I burnt them and kept the ashes in a sealed bottle. This too I later immersed in the river. Eventually Kunjbala too got married. Her husband knows me but did she ever tell him about me—I often wonder. Once on some social event her husband had come with her mother to my house. She too visited me with her mother after Bharti came to live with me. She got along very well with Bharti, and her mother too was greatly impressed with Bharti. Then in 1996 I once again met her husband who took me home with him. By then they were both grandparents and I remember she had served a sumptuous meal. Years went by and then one day she met my daughter Dharitri. She talked about me at length. I am not sure whether she knew about Bharti's death and my second marriage.

Part II

At Work

26. *Vadodara*

I completed tenth standard from Bharat High School, Kalol. For eleventh standard I was supposed to go back to P. J. Vakharia High School as Bharat High School had not been granted the permission to start the eleventh standard. Meanwhile, Vakhariabhai who lived in the house of Chhaganlal in the neighbourhood wanted me to sell his home-made hair oil in Ahmedabad. He claimed his oil had a cooling effect on the user. He promised a good commission on the sale and considering the financial condition of my family I readily accepted this offer. So while my classmates went to P. J.Vakharia High School, I travelled in the local train to Ahmedabad and tried to sell the hair oil. I had no intention of giving up my studies. I decided to enrol in a school in Ahmedabad so that I could get the student concession for the train fare. I took admission in Dharmanagar High School in Sabarmati, a suburb of Ahmedabad. I would board the early morning train and sell my product moving from one compartment to another, get down at Sabarmati Station and attend school. In the evening after school hours I would visit different hair cutting saloons in Ahmedabad and persuade the owners to buy this product.

This way I completed my matriculation. Then before I could think of further studies I had to think of earning a living. It was beyond my imagination to even consider taking up the science or the commerce streams. I decided to pursue the arts stream till I could get a job. I secured admission in the first year of arts in Ahmedabad's Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel College. After about one and a half years I got the job of a telephone operator—a government

job. I commuted for six months from Nadiad to Ahmedabad every day after which I joined C. B. Patel's Arts Institute in Nadiad. As I have mentioned earlier, I rented a house in Nadiad and completed my studies up to MA, working and studying at the same time.

Dr. Ambedkar has been a great inspiring force in my life. Under his influence, somehow, almost panting with exertion, I graduated. Graduation opened the door of the job of an officer in the government. I sat for almost all the examinations offered by the Gujarat Government Public Service Commission. Around 125 candidates were selected in the written and oral examinations held for the post of the assistant in the secretariat (now known as deputy section officer). I had topped the list. A special examination was held at that time for direct recruitment to the post of the taluka development officer. I remember, my principal had also sat for this examination but he could not clear the written test. I was fifth among the selected 40 candidates. In the test for the section officer's post I had secured the seventh rank and in the test for the post of the taluka level revenue officer—mamlatdar—I secured the thirteenth rank. I decided to accept this post with the tag of an unlucky number thirteen, because in any case I was under a curse of epic proportions. This unlucky number continued to be a part of my life.

I wanted to become a college teacher. However, I found that among the candidates selected for the post of the revenue officer there were five who had given up the post of college lecturer to accept the post of mamlatdar—deputy collector. I remember, Mr. Devlekar was the mamlatdar of Kalol then, and I knew him because his daughter Pratima had been my classmate in the eighth standard. He had earlier been a college teacher in Vadodara so I went to him for guidance. He advised me to accept the post of mamlatdar immediately. Thus I became a mamlatdar. It hurts me deeply that though I had been always selected on merit, continuously I have had to face the accusation of being selected in the special quota reserved for the Scheduled Castes.

The post of mamlatdar was a very prestigious one and so, for the people of the moholla, it was a joyous occasion. They organized a special reception in my honour Mr. P. K. Valera had also become a deputy collector and so he too was honoured by the dalits of Saij and Borisana villages. I remember I had received many garlands

on that occasion, which I had placed on the photograph of Dr. Ambedkar. I had realized on that occasion that in the days to come I would have to work to fulfil Dr. Ambedkar's appeal of 'get educated, get organized and then revolutionize'. My community had great expectations for me, and to fulfil these I had not only taken up this job but also put my life on board.

Like the legendary Abhimanyu, I had to cross many hurdles before I could take up and get confirmed in the post of the mamlatdar. I successfully cleared the police verification and passed the medical test, thanks to my strong physique. I even managed to get a guarantor for signing the bond. My first posting was going to be at Vadodara as a probationary mamlatdar. The Administrative Training Centre at that time was housed in Ahmedabad's Mental Hospital and so I was often the butt of many jokes. But during the training period, and later, when I resumed duty, I realized that I had indeed entered a larger though different mental asylum! I was reminded of Chekov's *Ward No. Six*, where living among the lunatics the doctor too loses his mental equilibrium. My position was no different! My batch was large and there was not enough space in the hostel to accommodate all of us. Some of us were put up in the nearby MLA quarters. I never became a member of the Legislative Assembly, but at least I can boast of having stayed in the quarters. My neighbour was Mr. Gangaram Raval, and since he too was from the Mehsana district, we were often together. The training was complex. During this period we had to work in different sections of the administration, that of the talati's, of the circle office, the office of the mamlatdar, the taluka panchayat office, collector's office, civil judge, and so on. I met many trainee officers who later on achieved great success in their careers. There was Mr. S. N. Shukla in the office of the civil judge. He was an IAS trainee at that time. He went on to become the collector of Himmatnagar and from there he became the district collector of Behraich in Uttar Pradesh. He married the daughter of the former governor of Gujarat, Mr. R. K. Trivedi. When I lived with my family in the government colony he used to live across our house. During my training in the police department, an IPS officer, Mr. Saha, was with me. He was later selected for the IAS. Mr. K. P. Chankya was also my batchmate.

In 1969 communal violence broke out in Gujarat. At that time I was undergoing training in Vadodara. Once, while I was touring Mandvi, a riot affected area, with the mamlatdar in an open jeep, somebody threw a soda bottle at the mamlatdar who immediately ducked and was saved; otherwise the bottle would have hit him hard in the neck.

I took keen interest in the work of the different departments where I was placed. I also sat for two tests: the 'revenue lower' and the 'revenue higher' while I was in the revenue department. I had prepared very hard for these tests, reading up the Land Revenue Code, Tenancy Act, Survey Manual, Scarcity Manual, Police Manual, Criminal Procedure Code, Evidence Act, and so on. The tests were very difficult, and if a candidate failed to clear them, he had to leave the job. I remember a candidate of the previous batch had to leave the services because he could not clear these. Fortunately, I cleared both the tests successfully. I also underwent police training. I learnt to throw tear gas shells and held a gun for the first time. I remember, I had fired ten rounds to hit the target, and in the firing test I had secured eighty out of the total of hundred marks.

During my training in Vadodara, one day I came across a news item in the *Indian Express* about the plight of the dalits in Bavla village in Dholka taluka. It stated that two taps had been provided there—one for the dalits and the other for the higher caste. A thin wall had been erected to separate the two taps so that the caste people could avoid being polluted by the untouchables. The dalits, the newspaper stated, were agitating against this segregation for a year. The newspaper also carried a photograph showing dalit women standing with pots. Soon after this report, I got my first posting as mamlatdar of Dholka, and on 1 December 1969 I went to Dholka to take charge.

27. Dholka

After completing my training as the probationary mamlatdar in Vadodara, on 1 December 1969, I came to Dholka to take charge as mamlatdar. Mr. H. M. Mehta, the out-going mamlatdar, had not relinquished charge yet. He did not want to leave Dholka and was trying hard, by pulling strings, to extend his stay. I realized that he could get my order cancelled, so I went up to him and said jokingly, 'Mehtasaheb, I'm not at all keen to take charge of Dholka. I haven't come here pulling any strings. The government has posted me here, and so I've come. I don't mind being posted anywhere in Gujarat and so if you need my help in getting my posting cancelled do let me know. I'll stay in the resthouse till the time you call me to take over the charge.'

He tried to move heaven and earth to stop his transfer. He met the taluka-level politicians, ministers, the collector and other bigwigs in the revenue office. Everybody supported him because nobody in the taluka wanted a dalit mamlatdar. The revenue office had many rich Patels and Rajputs on its staff, and for all of them it was demeaning to be under a dalit officer. In fact, the entire taluka waged a jihad against my posting, but they did not succeed—a fact that was surprising even for me. Finally, Mr. Mehta called me, and on 3 December he very reluctantly handed over the charge. My training had not exposed me to the political manipulations behind transfers. However, I learnt about it in-depth in my very first job. Transfer is an important part of a government officer's life. Generally, an officer is transferred every three years, but Mr. Mehta had been in Dholka for more than five years. I came to know that a posting in important areas often carried a price tag. Newspapers are full of such news. Often a transfer wangled by

one group is stopped by another group that brings pressure from the secretariat. There have been cases where an officer, after relinquishing his charge, came back to the same posting. Some officers even boast, 'I'll be back in a month's time.' A large-scale conspiracy seems to be working behind transfer orders! Perhaps the MPs and MLAs get more cases of petition for transfer than for developmental work! Of course, one does come across some honest hard working officers, who for the sake of their family, opt for insignificant postings. They often end up spending their entire tenure there. These people have no other interests besides their work. Some officers approach Delhi to get their work done. Such manipulated transfers are done against monetary benefits. But it also gives a fillip to casteism because in some of the key posts only people of specific communities are found. Many dalit officers find that even after they have acquired an adequate education, struggling hard under poverty and deprivation, and carrying recommendations from the Member of the Legislative Assembly, they are not given good postings. I've also seen cases where the dalit officers, in spite of their commendable work, had to retire without being promoted to the post of a collector—even after many appeals to the concerned ministers and other members of the Assembly. A book can be written on the subject of government posting! Most of the insignificant areas are kept for the dalit officers. They are readily posted in the backward or tribal areas. If ever they manage a posting in a key area, they face a great deal of protest. On the other hand, very few officers who are of higher castes are found in remote and backward tribal areas, except as a punishment posting, or because they have opted for it for personal reasons!

This was my first job. I was a fresh young graduate with a keen desire to prove my worth. My sympathies were naturally more with the dalits but I wanted to work for the betterment of the poor of the taluka. I had been an avid reader of Dr. Ambedkar's works during my school and college days and so had great respect for this fearless leader who had fought relentlessly for the empowerment of the dalits. I have imbibed from him a strong sense of courage. My exposure to the opposition in my first posting made me realize that I would be put to constant trial in

this job. I was also aware that even after taking over the charge, I could be shifted any time. It was a drought year and so the government had introduced a levy on paddy. I was given the target of collecting 80 tons of paddy as levy from the entire taluka. Some of the influential farmers of the taluka and the district decided to complain collectively to the collector that I was forcefully procuring this levy from the farmers. The collector summoned me to his office in Ahmedabad. When I reached at the appointed time, I found some of the leaders of the big farmers seated in his office. My first thought was that perhaps he had also called them for this meeting. I was slightly taken aback when they complained to the collector that I was using force to procure paddy. The collector looked at me. I replied calmly, 'I have not used any force. Why didn't anyone approach me with this complaint before going to you? It could then have been resolved at the taluka level. Moreover, I would like to know of a specific case where force was used. Give me the name of the village and the person who had been forced to pay.'

They could not give even one name. Then suddenly one of them said, 'Saheb, he has given the dalit farmers a 100 per cent levy waiver.'

The collector looked at the person who spoke, and he understood why they had come to him. He reprimanded them for making false allegations against me and said, 'Before coming to me with such baseless allegations you should have gone to him. He's the mamlatdar. What are your intentions? Don't you want to pay the levy?'

The authoritarian tone of the collector disconcerted them. There was complete silence. The collector turned to me and said, 'Go ahead with your plan. Come to me if you need any help.'

The leaders were embarrassed because many of them wanted the levy to be waived for the influential farmers, whereas my plan was to collect the levy with the cooperation of all the farmers. I toured the entire region, and at many villages I held meetings with the farmers at ten at night. There I explained to them, 'Those of you whose crops have failed need not pay anything, but I would request the others who have had a yield to willingly pay the levy. I

would give a 100 per cent waiver to those whose crops have failed but from others I expect an honest cooperation in the government's work.'

I went from village-to-village speaking in this frank manner, and my talk had a positive effect on the farmers. In many villages I found that the politicians and party workers had convinced the large farmers not to cooperate and as a result the small farmers were suffering. If the levy was not collected the farmers could not sell the rest of the crop in the market and get cash. These small farmers from different villages came to me in large numbers. I visited their villages and found that people paid up willingly and enthusiastically. The politicians and the party workers who called themselves the leaders of the people gradually lost their credibility among the masses. Later, I came to know that they used to waive the levy in favour of only those they thought fit. I succeeded in meeting the target of 80 tons of paddy. The collector was overjoyed to get this news and he gave me another 10-tons target. I fulfilled this target too. I was really astonished to find the big farmers instead of selling the paddy to the government at a stipulated lower price would sell outside the taluka at a higher price. It pained me to see that the leaders had turned even the farmers into traders! What a loss this was for the government! Much later after I had met the district target, a district supply officer confided to me, 'Considering the drought condition, we had expected only 10 tons of paddy from Dholka though the target given was of 80 tons.'

I was completely taken aback. I knew that generally the mamlatdars were given a target higher than what the collector actually expected; for example, if he expected 50 tons of paddy then he would set a target of 100 tons. This was done to tide over any deficiency from the weaker talukas, say, if they met only 50 per cent of their target. When I started collecting the levy I had decided I would not use any force—I would accept gratefully whatever the farmers gave willingly—and I could meet the target. My positive attitude had a good impact in the taluka and I gained good will among the farmers. But the leaders did not give up their effort to find faults with me.

One day some dalits came to me with a letter from one of the influential leaders. I read the letter, then tore it up, and told them,

'From now on don't come to me with anybody's recommendation. If you have any work, come directly to me.'

About an hour after they had left, I got a phone call from the leader. He said, 'How could you tear up my letter?'

I told him, 'Please allow people to come to me directly. Don't turn them into slaves of the party. Let them state their problem. They have to learn to voice their grievances. Why do you want to cripple them?'

I was well aware of my responsibilities towards the government and the dalits. I was keen to serve the dalits as well as the poor, the deprived, and the oppressed very sincerely, and I knew as a government official I had been given the opportunity to fulfil this duty. I remembered Dr. Ambedkar's advice to the dalits: Grab power. He had said that till the time the dalits had power in their hands, they would not be able to achieve anything. However, there was one condition: this power had to be used honestly and sincerely. As an administrative head of the taluka I was going to follow his advice, but soon I realized that while putting this advice into action I would have to face many challenges.

The first biggest challenge was to find accommodation. In the beginning, I stayed at the government resthouse but how long could I remain there? The news of my dalit status had spread in the town, and so, in spite of having a powerful post, I could not get a house. I would approve a house but the minute the house owner came to know about my caste, he refused to rent it to me. I met the local leaders and the MLAs but it yielded no result. The news of my inability to find an accommodation reached the district headquarters. It became a topic of conversation in the city, and for me it was a shameful event. To whom could I have confided my pain? Finally, out of desperation, I rented a house that belonged to a Muslim. It was situated at the outskirts of the city. We lived in one portion of the house, and in the other portion lived a Muslim talukdar, who was related to the Babi family of Junagadh. We had a longish kind of a room downstairs and a similar one upstairs. Bharti was lonely in this house and I too wanted a house in a better and more populated locality of the city. How ironical it was that a respected government officer could not get a suitable house in the city! There was a Government

Resolution (GR), which stated: 'If a dalit employee cannot be given a government residence then a house could be requisitioned and given to him.' But I had not heard of any instance where this had been implemented.

In this context, I want to describe another experience that I had when I was posted as the additional chitnis in the collector's office in Himmatnagar. One day I received the file on the allotment of quarters, and I found that it listed three vacant quarters. I requested the office to mark these houses, as per the GR issued in 1967, for allotment to the scheduled caste/tribe officials. So houses carrying numbers 1, 11, 21, and 31 were marked for the dalit and the tribal officers. I came to know that up to 1975, when I received the file, this resolution had not been put into action. The allotment of the houses was looked after by the offices of the chief of the police, civil surgeon and the district panchayat. I sent each of these offices a letter asking whether they were following the rules stipulated in the 1967 GR, and all of them replied in the negative. Then I sent them a copy of 1967 GR and instructed them to implement it. I wrote in the file that the three vacant quarters be allotted to the scheduled caste employees. The collector also wrote his approval, but the decision was strongly opposed by the employees who were not dalits. There was a big uproar in the district against this order and I faced a strong opposition. The employees' union repeatedly asked the collector to repeal the order as otherwise they threatened they would go on strike. The collector finally yielded and agreed to withdraw the order. I went to him and requested him earnestly not to yield to the union's pressure.

I went against the collector and submitted a note stating that a collector did not have the power to repeal an order once issued, and that the union too had no say in the matter. I added that in Himmatnagar the scheduled caste employees' union was not as strong as the higher caste employees' union. Moreover, the scheduled caste employees felt threatened by the other union and so they were not able to present their case. I drew attention to the illegal activity of the other union and appealed for a withdrawal of the collector's order. But in spite of my strong appeal, the order was withdrawn, and the higher caste employees' union won the battle. Everybody was overjoyed but imagine how

upset I was! Dalits could not get a house on rent and the government washed its hands of this problem by framing a beautiful resolution. But who was going to implement it? The concerned officials negated it. I had taken a great risk and had requested the collector to take action against the people who were behind this. But no action was taken. If the dalits were denied the government-sanctioned houses, who would let his house be requisitioned for me? In Dholka, there were no government houses for the revenue office staff, and though the panchayat had accommodation in its staff houses, it could not be sanctioned to a revenue officer.

My search for a proper house continued. Mahalakshmi Mata ni Pole was considered to be a posh area in that city. It was known as the 10 Downing Street of Dholka and I wanted a house there. Then one day, I came to know about a house for rent in this area. I met the house owner and to my surprise, he agreed to rent it to me. His family opposed his decision, but he overruled their protest and agreed to give me the house. I was apprehensive of being asked to vacate it after I had moved in. My status and dignity were at stake, so I told the landlord, 'I'll give you a month to think about. Once I occupy the house I'll not vacate it till I'm transferred.'

I moved into the house after a month and stayed there till I was transferred. Many important people like the chairman of the municipality, principals of schools and the college principal, bank managers, doctors and lawyers resided in that area. There was a huge *tanku*–a water tank–under the house that had been earlier used to collect rainwater. It also had an open courtyard within the house, around which were the rooms and the kitchen. In this courtyard, we once spotted a baby snake in our daughter's cradle. Another time, we spotted a five-foot snake in the courtyard and while we were debating how to cross the courtyard to get help, we saw the snake slither into the kitchen. We ran across, carrying our daughter to the front room. Mr. Danubhai Rajput used to live in the third house from ours. He was not at home at that time, but hearing our shouts, his wife came running to us. Soon people gathered around our house and watched the snake from a distance. I picked up a stick and stealthily approached the snake and then

quickly placed the stick on its head and held it tightly. Bharti stood behind me petrified. I asked Danubhai's wife to hit the snake with the pestle, but she too was scared. Then I asked her to hold the stick tightly which she did very courageously, while I picked up the pestle and hit it hard on the head.

After I took charge at Dholka, the first thing I did was to call a meeting of the entire staff and discussed the important issues with them. Then I called a meeting of the peons and said to them very courteously, 'Please feel free to come and discuss any problem, personal or work related. We have to work like a family.'

My words brought tears in the eyes of an old peon called Hamirbhai. He said, 'Saheb, in all these years of my job as a peon, nobody ever called us to a meeting. You are the first person who has spoken to us showing concern, and with respect. Others don't even consider us to be humans.'

Who decides who is a human? I recalled the lines of Sundaram, 'If only as a man I could acquire the qualities of a real human being!'

In 1971 a direct recruit for the post of the deputy collector came to Dholka for training. One day after the training session, some of the probationary officers expressed their difficulty in securing the solvency certificate needed to accept the post. An officer confided to me that the concerned mamlatdar demanded money in order to issue this certificate. I immediately called the three sarpanchs who had come to the revenue office, and asked them to prepare an affidavit of their wealth and land and the trainee deputy collectors paid them for the expense of getting the affidavits made. I did the rest of the formalities and gave them the certificates. They said they had been trying to get the certificate for the last two to three months! The batch of '71 still talks about this event.

I soon found out that no dalit in Dholka taluka had ever been issued a licence to own a ration shop. Premabhai was a retired government employee and a stamp vendor. I was told that later he had even contested the assembly election. I asked him to apply for a licence to start a ration shop. In the beginning, he hesitated, as he did not have the adequate capital. I assured him of help and he agreed to apply. I forwarded his application along with my recommendation to the collector and he received the licence to start the shop, which he opened in the dalit moholla. Many

higher caste people's ration cards carried the name of his shop. How could these people go to the dalit moholla to collect their rations? So an application requesting the cancellation of the licence was submitted to the collector's office. As long as I was in Dholka, I protected the shop. But when I left Dholka, there were fresh applications against it and after an enquiry, Premabhai's licence was repealed. Thus the first dalit shop of the taluka died an untimely death.

During my tenure in Dholka, the municipality election was held and I was the returning officer at that time. The results showed that the two contesting parties had a tie with twelve elected members in each. There was a thirteenth independently elected candidate named Tidabhai Vaghri. Both the parties exerted a great deal of pressure on him to join their respective parties. For this he was also offered many bribes. He came to me with his guru, Shri Jangleshwar Maharaj. I listened to him sympathetically. Then one day he came to me again and said, 'Saheb, both the parties are putting a lot of pressure on me. They have also tried to bribe my family members. Please tell me what I should do.'

I said, 'Have you seen the board that lists the names of the chairman of the municipality?'

'Yes Saheb, I've seen the board. It lists all those who have been the chairmen till today.'

I then added, 'Your name can also come on that board. And remember, it will then remain there even after you have stepped down from the post. People will remember you till the office continues to function. But if you yield to the temptation now and take the bribe, the money will be spent in a short time, and you'll revert back to your present condition. Moreover, taking a bribe is a punishable offence and what if somebody frames you by tempting you with a bribe? You will lose your reputation and for the generations to come you'll be held responsible for the shame that you brought on the family. But if you become the chairman, for generations to come your progeny and your community will honour you. As a chairman, you will be known as the city's first citizen and you will gain fame. You'll get a telephone and in meetings you'll find yourself seated between the collector

and the minister. This honour you'll never be able to secure even after spending thousands of rupees.'

Tidabhai was listening to me attentively. His eyes widened in astonishment and he immediately asked, 'But Saheb, who'll make me the chairman?'

He was serious. Until now nobody from his community had talked to a mamlatdar in this manner and he had never expected that a mamlatdar would talk to him so respectfully. His eyes overflowed with tears of happiness and pride. I explained to him that both the parties were fighting to get a majority and that was why they were giving him so much respect. Earlier, they used to call him Tidio but today they were showing their respect and affection by addressing him as Tidabhai. Then the latter asked what should he do? I replied that he should tell the party that approached him first that he would join them if they made him the chairman.

Tidabhai burst out laughing and said, 'Who'll agree to give me that august post? Saheb, which party would agree to such a condition?'

I said, 'At present all you have to do is put forth this condition and don't yield to any other pressure. Just wait and watch. You'll become the chairman.'

As a mamlatdar, I was aware of the intricacies of the town politics. Tidabhai put forth his condition to both the groups. Each group feared the other would agree to make Tidabhai the chairman. Next day Tidabhai came to me and told me that one party had agreed to make him the chairman. I told him that now he would have to work out the next step.

Tidabhai was elected the chairman. The next question was that of selecting the vice chairman. Tidabhai was from the Vaghri community which was considered to be backward and so no caste above him wanted to be under him. Finally a dalit member, Gandabhai Sonara, was selected the vice chairman.

This incident made me deliberate on the farsightedness of Dr. Ambedkar when he had chaired the committee that framed the Constitution. If we were not a democratic nation and if we did not have such a well-thought-out Constitution, would Tidabhai and Gandabhai have ever become the chairman and the vice chairman? Tidabhai's becoming the chairman of the municipality

had a great historic significance. Dholka was the first town in Gujarat to form a municipality, and now it also had the honour of having the first Vaghri chairman and the first dalit vice chairman. Nobody had elected them because they had respect or affection for them. They were elected thanks to the provisions in the Constitution.

After becoming the chairman, one day Tidabhai came to meet me in my office. I was amused to see my peon saluting him. As he drew the chair to sit, he said, 'Saheb, I've become the chairman but I'm scared of signing papers. What if somebody entraps me by making me sign wrong papers?'

I listened to him attentively. I knew all the people in his party and from amongst all of them I decided to call Mansuri Vakil to my office. I explained to him Tidabhai's predicament. He agreed to become Tidabhai's advisor.

I'm reminded of another funny incident caused by Tidabhai's name. It had happened before the municipality election. I had asked the deputy mamlatdar to call the taluka development officer to my office. The taluka development officer is generally known in the taluka as the TDO. Tidabhai too used to be called Tidio before he became the chairman. So to my surprise Tidabhai walked into my office and asked why he had been called. I was taken aback as I had not called him, and I told him so. He insisted that my peon had called him and when I checked with the peon he immediately replied that the deputy mamlatdar had told him that I wanted to meet Tidio and so he had asked him to come and see me. I began to laugh and explained that I wanted to meet the TDO. The deputy mamlatdar was also very amused at the confusion as was the TDO when I did get to meet him. In turn he told me, 'Once, a head constable came to call me. I was astonished and wondered why I had been called. When I went to the police station, the sub inspector said jokingly, "TDO Saheb, why are you here? Have you come to get somebody released?" I was surprised and in turn told them that his constable had called me. Finally it dawned that they had wanted to see Tidio because of an illicit liquor case where Vaghris had been arrested. We laughed about the mix-up and then the TDO had a cup of tea with the sub

inspector. Much later, I wrote a short story based on this incident, which was later published in *Akhand Anand*.

While I was in Dholka a writ petition had been made in the High Court regarding the election procedure of the municipality. There were three dates for sending in the names of the contestants and I had included some names in the electoral roll on the day before the last stipulated for nominations. Some of these contestants won the election. A writ was made in the court demanding nullification of the election on the ground of late entry of the names of the contestants. All three contestants were elected from only three wards and so the government pleader had prepared an affidavit to cancel the election results of these wards. However, I did not want these election results to be cancelled, so I refused to sign the affidavit. The government pleader came to me and said, 'In one of the municipalities in Saurastra, the entire election had been cancelled on this point. I've requested only the results of the three wards to be cancelled. If you refuse to sign this affidavit, then you'll have to prepare your own affidavit.'

I sat down and prepared a fresh affidavit in which I stated: 'There were three dates for sending in the nominations and I sent in the names before the last date. This is as per the act and rule, and also according to the notification. By this action a person's right to vote or stand in election in a democracy remains unobstructed.'

In the High Court, the judge accepted my argument but because in an earlier case on the same issue an entire election had been cancelled, this case was submitted to the Division Bench. The Division Bench accepted my argument and nullified the opponent's writ. The government pleader was greatly surprised. The High Court's ruling put a seal on my decision. The municipality election was not cancelled, which had a favourable impact on the town.

After I took over charge, many dalit leaders and other poor citizens came to me with their problems. One of the frequent visitors was Jangleshwar Maharaj, the guru of the Vaghris. He had great affection for me and I too helped him to resolve many of his problems. In the beginning when I started my work as a mamlatdar, Govindhbhai, an elderly gentleman from Bavla

village, used to visit me every week or every fortnight. He was a follower of Dr. Ambedkar and had participated in the agitation headed by Dr. Ambedkar in his youth. So every time he came to me, he would narrate this experience over and over. He would rattle of in one breath and I would listen to him attentively. He was always delighted to see me and whenever I told him that Dr. Ambedkar had been the most important inspiring force in my life, he had tears in his eyes. He would then get up, wiping his tears, bless me, pick up his stick, and leave. Many dalits from remote villages came to meet me, and very often they stood before me unable to express themselves clearly, as if they had lost their speech, and this was partly because of their fear of violent repercussions from the village people for having dared to come to the mamlatdar. Some of them were so poor that they did not even have the money for the return bus fare, which I often paid for them!

During my visits to the dalit moholla in Dholka, I found such harmful habits like gambling and eve teasing prevalent among the youth. With the help of the local police I put a stop to all such activities. I assured the residents of my help in case of any difficulty. Among the acquaintances that I had made in the moholla, I remember Hiralal and his younger brother, Trikambhai, who visited me quite often. Trikambhai later became a college teacher, and I remember having attended his wedding in Ahmedabad. I never refused any social or religious invitations. I would take time out of my busy schedule to attend such functions. My social life was very busy. We had many visitors while we were in Dholka. I remember having long discussions on the dalit issue with Mr. Karelia, a labour court judge. His younger brother at that time was a medical practitioner in Jamnagar and his sister Saroj a medical student. Saroj and Trikambhai's sister, also a postgraduate student, were friends of Bharti. I found a great deal of awareness among the dalits in Dholka. Ghanshyambhai Vaghela, whom I had met during my training period in Vadodara had once visited us with his family in Dholka. He later became the director of Akashvani. Pravinbhai Rastrapal, and Atmaram Dholakia, the deputy director of the social welfare department, also visited me. Once we were fortunate

to have the late Ramanand Shastri in our house; he had spent an entire day with me. Shastriji had an ashram in Uttar Pradesh and a large following there. Since Independence, he has been winning the Lok Sabha seat from his constituency in Uttar Pradesh. He had close contact with many important people in the government including the prime minister and the president. I remember a commemorative volume had been brought out on his sixtieth birthday, which he had gifted me. This volume carried messages from the prime minister, the president, many cabinet ministers and other dignitaries. His birthplace was Dholka but he had left the town at a very young age, renouncing family life, to become an ascetic. He went to Uttar Pradesh to study Sanskrit and there he acquired the title of Shastri. I saw his dilapidated house in the dalit mohalla of Dholka. Once, a writ had been made against him in the court, accusing him of wrongly using his dalit status to get elected to the Lok Sabha. I had helped him on that occasion with the necessary evidence. Then there was Mr. B. G. Parmar, the director of social welfare department, with whom I often had long discussions on the dalit problem. He later became the managing director of the Scheduled Caste Economic Development Corporation.

My interest in literature made me seek the company of poets, writers, journalists, teachers and litterateurs, who were regular guests at our house. Once during the Census I arranged a training programme for all the teachers of the taluka and as a result I became acquainted with them as well. During the elections I had even organized a special training programme for the teachers. Another close acquaintance was Mr. Bhojak. He was a direct recruit to the post of mamlatdar, but later he resigned, and became a college teacher. Once when it was raining very heavily, I got the news that many houses in certain parts of the city had collapsed, and I immediately rushed to inspect those areas. Suddenly there was a very heavy downpour and I was completely drenched. Fortunately, I was near Mr. Bhojak's residence. In that condition I knocked at his door. His wife, Pushpaben, opened the door. Seeing me in that state, she cried out in alarm and fussed over me as if I was her brother. She handed me a towel and lighted a coal stove and placed it in front of me. Then in a

jiffy she was back with a hot cup of spicy tea. Mr. Bhojak and his younger sister, Dolly, greeted me warmly. To my great embarrassment, Dolly even rubbed Vicks on my chest, nose and forehead. I was deeply touched by their warmth and affection. Pushpaben had two brothers, both well placed: one a deputy collector and the other a doctor who had married his classmate, a pretty daughter of a wealthy jeweller of Ahmedabad. I have never been able to forget this family. But once I left Dholka, I lost all contact with them and today I do not even know their whereabouts. Then there was Bhupendra Chudasama who was a youth leader at that time. In his later days he became the minister of agriculture and at present he heads the Narmada Corporation.

Once I had shared the dais with the humorous writer Bakul Tripathi. A local college had organized his talk, where I was also invited. I still possess the photograph where I was seated, flanked by Bakul Tripathi and the principal of the college. I never missed an opportunity to attend a literary function. I was once called to give a talk at a valedictory function of the NCC camp at Chiloda village. I spoke about my creative process and read two of my short stories: '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*' and '*Ret no Mehel*'. On another occasion, Navalbhai Shah of Gundi Ashram invited me for a story reading. Around eight at night, the village people gathered in the courtyard of the panchayat office and I read '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*'. The use of rural dialect in the story roused a great deal of interest among the people. I stayed back that night at Gundi and next day, I had lunch at Navalbhai's place. I still fondly recall the hot rotlis his wife served me at lunch. Navalbhai himself was a writer. He later became a minister. I remember that Jesingbhai Dabhi and Kahanjibhai had shown me around the ashram and I had a long discussion with them about the activities of the ashram. On that visit, I had bought a ceramic statue of Lord Buddha from the ashram store that still adorns the shelf at the headboard of my bed. I sleep with my head resting at Lord Buddha's feet. My other acquaintances were Ambubhai, Surabhai Bharvad, Chhaganbhai Bharvad and Gagu Mukhi. Ambubhai had helped me in the case of a friend who faced dismissal from his job because he had failed four times to pass the departmental examination.Ambubhai had met the chief minister and had stopped his dismissal.

There are many references of atrocities on the dalits of Dholka in Dr. Ambedkar's writings; the most notable being the ones on the dalits of Kavitha. I once visited Kavitha and went to the well side with the sarpanch. I stood there and called the dalits to come up to the well. Not a single dalit made any move. The sarpanch said, 'Saheb, we don't prevent them from coming here. But what can we do if they refuse to do so?'

For ages this has been the standard excuse doled out by the other castes. How often such wise talks have been the topic of discussion. The dalits knew that if they dared, as soon as the officer left, they would be attacked! So many years after Dr. Ambedkar, the dalits had not mustered up courage to face the castes above them! They did not dare to open their mouth! Kavitha's dalits even today lack the strength to face up to their exploitation. I remember another experience I had when I was the planning officer at Palanpur in Banaskantha District. A study had been conducted on the social, economic and the educational conditions of the villagers in the two villages of Danta and Vav talukas in Palanpur in Banaskantha District. The study was conducted ten years back by Gujarat Vidyapeeth. I was keen to find out about the progress made since, and so I asked Vidyapeeth to conduct a fresh study. The findings were astonishing. Even after ten years, there had not been any development in these areas. The dalits had remained where they had been ten years back. This report is present in the district planning office. Similarly, in the case of the dalits of Kavitha, the practice of untouchability was prevalent even after so many years. The clock seemed to have stopped for them!

One day the judicial magistrate first class civil judge (JMFC) of Rupal village came to my office and asked for police protection. He said: 'I have to visit this particular village but some thugs there have threatened to kill me. Please arrange for my safe visit.' The residents of this village were mainly Muslims but because of some internal fights he had received the threat calls. I made all arrangements for his protection, but it made me wonder that if I had to provide police protection to a magistrate to visit a village, then what would

be the condition of the dalits of that place? In the same village there was a case of the rape of a dalit girl. At night some goons came and abducted her, carrying the charpoy on which she was sleeping.

There was a person in the village, who had the habit of lodging complaints over any trivial matter. He used to dash off letters to the taluka and district offices and sometimes even to the secretariat. After scrutiny it was always found that his allegations were baseless. Finally, the government had to send a notice instructing all the concerned offices to ignore his complaints. I too used to receive all kinds of complaints. Once during relief work in Dholka. I had to get the fodder godowns opened because I had received a complaint stating 'the bundles of fodder had walked away'. Among the various other duties of the mamlatdar, I had to decide on the allotment of fair price shops and grain storage godowns and distribution of land. It was very easy to find faults in these matters and lodge complaints. Once during a flood there was a complaint of misappropriation of cash dole. I remember an incident where I saw a boy save a man from drowning in the floods. Next day I was astonished to read in the newspaper, 'A boy had rescued a man from drowning and though the mamlatdar was present when this incident took place, he did not even congratulate the boy.'

It was while I was in Dholka that I had the first experience of the press's irresponsible reporting. This was after I had taken over the charge there. There were communal riots all over Dholka taluka. Though Dholka town was peaceful, there were continuous rumours of riots spreading to it too. I regularly patrolled the town late at night in a jeep and was very vigilant, taking care nothing untoward happened. Then suddenly there was an incident of cow slaughter and the situation became tense. The Hindus went on a fast. The situation was precarious. I called a meeting of the peace committee and after a great deal of persuasion the situation was brought under control. I convinced the Hindus to break their fast and served them juice personally. Though there was normalcy in the town, I decided to continue with the Criminal Procedure Code 144, which

banned gathering of more than five people. Soon it was time for the annual marriage procession that is taken out on the occasion of Tulsi vivah. Under the law of 144, no procession could be taken out, but people of Dholka were adamant. All my efforts to convince them proved futile. The order of clamping the code 144 had been issued by the district magistrate, and till it was repealed, the procession could not be taken out. I could not give them the permission because only the collector had the power to do so. The leaders went and met the collector in Ahmedabad but he refused to give the permission. Then they came back to me. I called up the additional district magistrate and explained the situation. But the police and the deputy collector were not willing to give the permission. Eventually, after a great deal of persuasion, they agreed to allow them to take out the marriage procession under certain conditions. After assessing the seriousness of the situation the collector, the DSP, and the DIG came down to Dholka from the district headquarters. The leaders agreed on an earlier time for the procession because they were keen to carry out this ritual. Usually there is a big crowd on this occasion with people coming from the nearby villages. But that year, before people could gather, the procession had reached the destination. There was a strong police *bandobast* for the occasion: the number of police was more than the devotees. However, people's power prevailed on that day.

In the later chapters I have given a detailed village-wise description of the condition of dalits in Gujarat. Readers will realize, going through these chapters, how the entire taluka was engaged in getting me transferred from Dholka. Many of the caste leaders who took an interest in the question of the dalits also went against me because they felt threatened by my presence. Some of the employees in my office were also interested in my transfer because I did not allow any delay in work. Some had sought their transfer to other offices for this very reason. Finally, all their efforts paid off and I was transferred to Visavadar taluka in Junagadh district. Dhandhuka taluka's mamlatdar, Mr. Acharya, was given my position. While I was awaiting Mr.

Acharya to hand over charge, Ramanand Shastri arrived in Ahmedabad from Delhi. In the circuit house he came to know about my transfer from some people of Dholka. When he learnt about the malicious intentions with which it had been managed, he wanted to meet me. He called Mr. Parmar, director of the social welfare department, to find out about my whereabouts. He tried to telephone me but I was at the collector's office, where I was told that Mr. Parmar was trying to contact me and I immediately went to meet him. As soon as Mr. Parmar saw me he said, 'Since this morning Ramanand Shastri has been looking for you. He is worried about your transfer and the dalits of Dholka have requested him to stop this transfer. But first he would like to meet you.'

I went to the circuit house. He welcomed me warmly. He was in his sanyasi's robe and was surrounded by dalit workers. He was delighted to see me and I could sense that he loved me dearly. He took me inside and said, 'Your transfer order worries me. The dalits have requested me to stop it. They have even threatened to start an agitation. What do you want to do?'

I replied, 'I do not wish to do anything. This is not a question of my desire. Wherever I'm posted I'll pay attention to the dalit issues and work for them.'

He said at once, 'But you have no objection if the transfer is cancelled, do you?'

I told him I had no objection and immediately he left for Gandhinagar and met the chief minister. The very same day Mr. Acharya received a phone call in Dhandhuka and was told not to go to Dholka to take charge.

Thus my transfer was stalled. After many years I came to know that even a dalit minister was involved in the manipulation of my transfer, and Ramanand Shastri had come to know about it. Some days after this incident I met the same minister. He was visiting Dholera at the time of the laying of the Ingoli pipeline, and I had to receive him. At lunch the president of the Dhandhuka Taluka Panchayat, Mr. Chudasama, said jokingly to the minister, 'Ministersaheb, didn't you say that the transfer order of Dholka's

mamlatdar had been issued from the top, and so nobody could stop it? But the transfer was stopped and the mamlatdarsaheb is with us at this meal.'

He then looked at me and smiled. The minister didn't know where to look.

At a later stage of my career, I realized that I should have taken the transfer. The battle against me gradually gained momentum and became very violent. At one point it reached the level when there was a demand for suspending me. In this battle other officers also joined. Finally, they found an insignificant case against me, and the collector sent in the petition to the revenue department of the secretariat demanding my suspension.

28. *Sahij*

One day Shakrabhai Lakhabhai of Sahij village came to my office and very hesitantly broached the problem of the dalits in the village. He said, 'Saheb, the government has allotted 36 acres of land to the Dalit Cooperative Society for cultivation, but we only possess around 10 acres. The people living around us have usurped most of our land. The patel from Radhu village has about 99 acres of land, adjacent to the cooperative's. We know that he has usurped our land and he is refusing to get his land measured. He and other bullies of the village are cultivating the land of the cooperative and also government land. If we could get back just the Society's land we would be satisfied.'

Then he lowered his voice and added, 'Saheb, please don't tell anyone in the village that I've told you all this or it would become difficult for me to live there.'

I wanted to help the dalits but I knew that first I had to instil courage in them. They were hesitant to present their case, because they were terrified of the influential people of the village. I assured Shakrabhai and promised him of a just decision. I told him, 'Go back to the village and inform the talati that I'll visit your village tomorrow.'

He was startled and immediately said, 'Saheb, please don't do that. If I inform the talati, then everybody in the village will come to know that I came to you. Will they then spare me and let me live in peace? They will tear me apart.

So I told him that I would come on my own and he would not have to say anything to anyone.

The next day, without informing anyone, I went to the village. I gathered the entire village at the *chora*, including both the present and the former sarpanchs. The Rabaris, Vaghris, and the Rajputs who were cultivating the land without permission were also present. I told them that I wanted to inspect the riverbed. The former sarpanch at once pointed out that the place was very muddy and I would get my shoes dirty. I immediately replied that if it were muddy I would remove my shoes. We trooped down to the riverbed. I went around the area and found it was being cultivated without anyone having secured the necessary permission to do so. The talati informed me that everyone cultivated without permission.

I told him, 'Have you documented the unauthorized cultivation?'

'Yes Saheb.' Though the talati said so, I knew that his position in the village was precarious. He had to live there, and also safeguard his job and his family.

The riverbed looked picturesque. There was a refreshing breeze and the river gurgled down amidst the greenery of the cultivated fields. The rich alluvial soil of the riverbed was conducive to the cultivation of sugarcane and bajra. In the sandy infertile part of the bed, the Vaghris, who were among the poor communities of the village, had planted cantaloupe and watermelon. The fertile land was, of course, cultivated by the influential people of the village. It was a vast expanse. Then I went to the patel's fields. He had a huge area of land, about 99 acres, as shown in the survey map. Here too the crop of bajra was swaying in the wind. At first glance I felt that the land was more than 99 acres. He seemed to have usurped some of the riverbed land. The Dalit Cooperative Society's land was adjacent to the patel's land, and so Sakhrabhai was afraid of taking any action. My interest was to find out whether the Dalit Society possessed the land allotted to it. At first glance I realized that the Society had in its possession only half of the allotted land. I spent the entire day on the riverbed. When we came back to the village chora in the evening, I told the villagers that the river had changed its course so we would need to take a fresh measurement of the land.

The words 'land measurement' made them apprehensive. My intention was to get the dalit land measured along with the other

land. The patel of Radhu village was startled by this talk of measurement. He was a shrewd man and it did not take him long to understand the implication. After the meeting when I was getting ready to return to Dholka, he said, 'Saheb, you have come this far, so why don't you visit my house? I live on the other side of the river. It's not very far from here. Please have a cup of tea before you leave.'

I knew why he wanted me to visit him, but I was keen to gather some information about this land, so I agreed and went with him. He was considered to be the right hand man of the astute minister, Madhavlal Shah. While drinking tea, he said, 'Saheb, the British government had bestowed the title of Rao Saheb on my father.'

I wasn't going to be impressed by such talks. I laughed and answered, 'I don't know why the British government gave your father this title, but I do know that now I'm the true Rao Saheb.'

He did not like what I said but pretended to laugh. In the talukas of the erstwhile Vadodara state, the mamlatdar used to be called Rao Saheb and some people in Dholka including my staff used this title while addressing me.

The patel insisted that I stay for dinner, but I refused. I never ate at anybody's place. I returned to Dholka that night. Next day, I discussed the matter with the circle inspector and the deputy mamlatdar. They knew that I had visited the place so they gave me the correct information. The deputy mamlatdar said, 'Most people cultivate without the sanction. For some, the sanction papers have been prepared but not for all.' The circle inspector said the same thing. I told them, 'If people encroach upon government land in this manner, then what are you doing? Your job is to visit and inspect. When did you last visit this land?' They started to falter. I told them, 'I want the entire riverbed land measured. But before that, you go around the place and prepare a list of all those who are cultivating the land without the necessary sanction papers and present the report in a week's time.'

The deputy mamlatdar said that the land had already been measured and so I asked them to show me the map, which they did. If I had not visited the place, it would have been impossible for me to assess the situation from the map. I looked at the

map. The 99 acres of the patel from Radhu village were shown separately. There were other surplus lands also, and on all these lands, names of those who were cultivating without permission had been scribbled in pencil. So I asked if they had any documents of these people whose names had been scribbled in pencil. The circle inspector did not have any information. Nobody had checked whether the documents had been made according to this map. I told them that the situation at the riverbed was different from what was shown in the map. At the site, the area demarcated as 99 acres in the map appeared to be more. Moreover, after this map had been made, the river had changed its course, and as a result, there was surplus land now. I asked them to write to the district office to conduct a fresh survey of the land and to inform the district inspector, Land Record, about this.

A letter was sent from my office to the district office, requesting a fresh land survey and the necessary papers were prepared. Shakrabhai gained a little confidence after this. He gathered other dalit leaders of the taluka and went to meet Jheenabhai Darji. One day, Jheenabhai came to my office and said: 'I came to know that dalits do not have in their possession the land allotted to them. They should have full possession of the land.'

Vinubhai Bhairavia (who later became a High Court judge) also came to my office with Shakrabhai. He too put before me a similar demand. I too had been trying to find a way to resolve the issue, so I told him that I could not do anything till the land was surveyed. Many leaders from different talukas visited me to discuss this matter. Jangaleshwar Maharaj came with the demand of the Vaghri cultivators as they had been told that their land would be taken away to give to the dalits. The land they cultivated was sandy, and of inferior quality, and yet they had been instigated against the dalits.

Now Shakrabhai came frequently to my office. I urged him every time to muster up courage and present his case openly. I also instructed him to get ready to face the consequences. The survey schedule was sent to the village officials from the district

office. I informed the officials that I would be present at the time of land survey. The surveyor did not think I would waste time coming there, so he was surprised to see me present. When I reached the riverbed, I found the patel of Radhu village, the former and present sarpanchs, and other leaders of the village present. I told the surveyor, 'Use one colour to indicate in this survey map the earlier course of the river. Then with a different colour show the extra land that has resulted because of the change in the course of the river. With a third colour, indicate the Society's land that the holder of the survey number 99 is cultivating at present.'

Hearing this the patel said, 'Saheb, that will be possible only if the land of the Society falls in my survey number, isn't it? Otherwise how can you show it?'

I replied: 'That's exactly what I mean; it should be indicated only if the land is in it. If the dalits' land is not in your land then there's no need to indicate it. In the same way if you are cultivating the riverbed land, which has not been indicated in the survey as yours, that also should be specified and shown.'

I spent three days on the riverbed. Once when the land was being surveyed Shakrabhai said that he was worried that something could happen to me, adding, that the bajri and sugarcane crops had grown so tall! A man could easily hide in it without being noticed. Moreover, these people hade guns and if they shot me down nobody would ever know about it. I laughed and said he should not worry about me but take care of himself. Shakrabhai was right. In this lonely area and amidst standing crops, if someone were to kill a person and bury him, nobody would know about it. That's why the dalits were afraid, but when they saw me roam around so unconcerned they gathered courage.

The land was surveyed and the facts became clear. The patel had usurped a large portion of the land that belonged to the dalits and the government. I asked him to vacate that land right then, in my presence. He replied, 'Saheb, when the area is so large how would one know? What will I do with the government's land? I will vacate it.'

But he did not vacate either the Society's land or the government's. I decided to take one step at a time. I deliberately did not give any notice to others to vacate the occupied land. I knew that if I sent notices to them, then they would go to court and bring a stay order on the land. In fact, many in the village were happy with this survey. They too wanted the patel to vacate the land. There was standing crop on his land and so the patel was not going to vacate it so easily. In the end, I asked the circle inspector to destroy the crop. He went to the village and told him about the possibility of his crop being destroyed. His lawyer came to my office and said, 'If you destroy our crop, we will claim a compensation of Rs.80,000.'

I promptly replied: 'Why Rs.80,000? Put a claim of Rs.80 lakhs. I have not violated any law. I have the government and the government's lawyers to fight my case.'

Many leaders from the village came to me to discuss this matter. They informed me that even the vice president of the taluka panchayat had sugarcane crop on this land. They tried to threaten me through other officials. I told them, 'You are free to go to any court you like.'

But they did not go to any court.

The dalits had been given 36 acres of the government land but they had in their possession less than half of this area. After the present land measurement, about 250 acres were found to be surplus land. I sanctioned this land to the Dalit Society for a period of one year. I should really have waited for the possession of land to be taken back from the unauthorized cultivators and then given the order. But I knew that to do this I would have to send notices to various parties. With the receipt of this notice, they would get a stay order from court. Once the stay order notice was issued, I would not be able to do anything, for it would then invite contempt of the court. Moreover, if I was transferred half way through this procedure, then the dalits would be left without any land, and so without waiting for their getting back the possession of land I gave out the order. It had serious repercussions in the village. Then I sent out notices to all those who were now in possession of this land. As I had anticipated, they all went to the court and got a stay order notice. The dalit

locality was attacked that night and Shakrabhai and his sons were beaten up. The dalits were now scared. Some of them came to me and broke down, 'Saheb, we don't want any land. We are happy with whatever land we have.'

I urged them to be brave. As soon as Shakrabhai was attacked I immediately went to the dalit moholla of the village. All kinds of rumour were afloat in the village. They were angry with Shakrabhai. 'It's only because of him that we have to face this consequence.' I explained the situation to them, and also tried to boost up their morale. The tiles of Shakrabhai's roof had been broken and I could see the blackened portion of the walls of his house as a result of the fire that the villagers had set to his house. His son was badly injured and his hand had had to be bandaged. I asked the superintendent of police to send more police to the moholla.

At first, many supported Shakrabhai, because he was fighting against the patel of Radhu village. They knew that taking advantage of his large area he had usurped not only the land of the dalits but also the government land on the riverbed. But when I gave away this entire area to the dalits, many of the village bigwigs found they too lost what they had usurped. It had a boomerang effect on them. The atmosphere in the village was completely vitiated. Their anger towards the dalits was ignited. They stopped employing them as farm labourers. I told them clearly that if the dalits were boycotted, I would be compelled to take strict measures.

I had by then created quite an impression on the villagers. They felt that if the mamlatdar could take action against such an influential person as the patel of Radhu village, then they stood very little chance. They felt defeated. Many among the Rabari, Rajput and the Vaghri communities enjoyed important positions at the taluka level. They had houses in Dholka town. So they did not publicly boycott the dalits but neither did they employ them as labourers. The dalits were scared to go to their farms, and, as a result, a starvation-like situation was created. Shakrabhai visited my office and described the pitiable situation in the moholla. How could anybody deliberately create such a woeful condition for his fellow human beings! The dalits only wanted to eke out a

living through honest and lawful means and yet how many hurdles were placed before them! I asked Shakrabhai whether there was any other government land in the village. He said there was land near the village pond but that was registered in the land record as the panchayat's, and so as a mamlatdar I had no power over it. Yet I issued an order stating it should be given to Shakrabhai for a year. This had serious repercussions in the village. How could a mamlatdar distribute the panchayat's land? Other panchayats in the taluka were also perturbed. As a result not just the village leaders, but the taluka leaders also went against me. They brought a stay against this order from the court at Narol. Generally, before a stay order is issued, the rule stipulates that the mamlatdar has to be consulted, and only if the complainant faced a serious consequence, the stay order could be issued. But here it was an issue of the dalits and so the order was given after one-sided hearing.

The dalits of Sahij village were now upset. Shakrabhai had become quite a known figure in the village. He went to the secretariat and presented the case to the minister. The collector received a telephone call from the secretariat and he came down to Dholka. I apprised him of the situation. He asked me to find a way out. I said, 'The village people have brought a stay on the land on the riverbed. They have also managed to get a stay on the land near the village pond.'

The collector asked, 'Is there any other government land in the village?'

I replied, 'Yes, the pasture. If you give me the permission, I'll issue an order that eight acres of the pasture land be given to Shakrabhai.'

But he answered, 'The pasture land belongs to the panchayat. You would need panchayat's resolution for that.'

I replied that under the present circumstances, the panchayat was not going to pass any resolution. He looked at me. I added, 'I have issued an order for the land near the pond in favour of Shakrabhai for a year. I know this is not under my jurisdiction, and yet I've taken this step to prevent the dalits from dying of starvation. If you give me your verbal permission, I'll issue the order of the eight acres of pasture land.'

The collector knew that I was an honest hardworking officer. He verbally gave me his permission. In fact, before I talked to him, I had thought of giving only eight acres of the pasture land to Shakrabhai. But as soon as the collector gave me permission I sent for Shakrabhai and told him, 'Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock I'll come to your village. I'll give you the possession papers of the eight acres of pasture land. You be at the village at that time.'

Shakrabhai was astonished to hear about the pasture land. I knew that if I had issued the order beforehand, like I did for the land near the pond, once again the village people would get a stay order from court. The court opened at 11 o'clock. I reached the village sharp at nine in the morning. The talati and the circle inspector were also present. They immediately called the sarpanch. The news of the mamlatdar giving away eight acres of pasture to Shakrabhai spread in the village. People gathered at the pasture. One of the leaders of the village people asked me, 'Saheb, how can you allow the pasture to be cultivated?'

I replied, 'What's the alternative? People like you have usurped the government land. If you vacate the government land, I'll not give the pasture.'

I handed over the eight acres of pasture to Shakrabhai. I prepared a *panchnama* (a document made in the presence of five witnesses) of that land. The sarpanch put his signature on this panchnama. The former sarpanch arrived on horseback. I made him alight and got his signature too. Generally either the talati or the circle inspector does this kind of handing over. But in this case I did. When people came to know that I had come to hand over the land, some of them rushed to Dholka. They consulted their lawyer and went off to Narol court to get a stay order on the land. They procured the stay order the very same day, but before they could procure it, I had already handed over the land. So this stay order was rendered ineffective. I forwarded a copy of the panchnama to the court.

The villagers were now really perturbed. The tilling of pasture land had a serious outcome on the entire taluka. Gagu Mukhi, a Bharvad, that is, a shepherd from Bhurkhi village, was a well-known figure in the taluka. He approached me with a delegation of a large

number of Rabari and Bharvad leaders, and said, 'Saheb you've now allowed tilling of the pasture land!'

I said without losing my composure that I had no option. Then taluka and district level leaders came to meet me. Everybody tried to persuade me to take back the order on the pasture land. But I did not give in. So they went to the secretariat, and met the ministers—Manabhai Bhambhi, Amarsingh Chaudhary and the revenue minister, Narendrasingh Jhala. I received an urgent telephone call from the secretariat: 'The Minister wants to meet you right now.' Manabhai Bhambhi first called me and after listening to everything he asked me, 'Has the panchayat passed a resolution? Is the area of land more than the total number of cattle?' (there is some kind of ratio of cattle and land that prevails before pasture land can be allocated for cropping).

I told him that the panchayat had not passed a resolution and that the area of the pasture was sufficient for the number of cattle.

I explained the entire situation. After listening to the details, he seemed to be very pleased with me and said, 'Jadavsaheb, why don't you come to Idar?'

I answered, 'It is not in my hands. If the government sends me there, I'll certainly go.'

He said he would talk to the revenue minister and get me transferred to Idar. Later I came to know that he had even announced at some public gatherings in the Sabarkantha district that I was going to be made the mamlatdar of Idar. But I was not transferred.

Some people from Sahij village then met Mr. Amarsingh Chaudhary. There was a telephone call from his office which informed me that the minister wanted to meet me immediately. When I met the minister, he too asked me the same questions that Manabhai Bhambhi had asked, 'Has the panchayat passed a resolution? Is the pasture much greater than what the total number of cattle needs? I said no and explained what had happened. The villagers had not said a word to the minister about their usurping government land. They wanted the ministers to compel me to withdraw the order, but did not

succeed. Finally the taluka and the district level leaders along with the villagers met Narendrasingh Jhala. Once again I received a telephone call from his office summoning me to meet him with all the relevant files. He too first asked me, 'Did the panchayat pass the resolution? Is there more land than what the total number of cattle needs?'

Again my answer was in the negative. Then I explained in detail the land the dalits had been earlier tilling, how much land the villagers had usurped, and how much surplus government land was found in the fresh survey. I told him about the stay order on this land, the stay order on the pasture, the condition of the dalits, the attacks on them and the starvation-like situation created as a result of all this. At the end I said, 'Sir, the pasture is reserved for cattle and is not used for cultivation. There is plenty of land for grazing. I've given only eight acres out of this vast area to a man to save his family from starvation.'

The minister now understood the situation. He knew that in some villages around 300-400 acres of land were earmarked only for grazing, and often the bigwigs using their strength and wealth used it for cultivation. He calmed down and said, 'Take as much police force as you want, and till the pasture.'

I asked him, 'Could I have the help of the State Reserve Police (SRP) instead of the local police force?'

The minister called Dholka's deputy superintendent of the police, Mr. Bakshi, and in my presence gave the following order: 'Provide police protection, as asked by the mamlatdar. If he needs more police force then do so. Ensure that peace is not disturbed.'

I planned the agenda of tilling of the pasture. Two lawyers representing the villagers came to see me and one told me that there was a stay order from the court on this land and if I arranged for tilling then it would attract contempt of court. He hoped I was aware of the consequences of this action. The other lawyer added that there was a risk that I might lose my job: I replied that though they were lawyers they did not seem to know the law. I had sanctioned the possession of land before the court had issued the stay order and thus the latter could not be implemented. Moreover I had kept the court informed and had not received any

intimation from the court so far. I advised them not to threaten me with contempt of court. After a while I smiled and said that they were new to this field and therefore did not seem to remember that I was also the executive magistrate of the taluka and did they not have to come to me in the criminal procedure cases? And in the chapter cases, did they not need me to grant bail to the accused? I added that they could have got a stay against tilling of the land after the other stay became ineffective, but they did not do so.

They protested, 'But then this matter is in the court, and hence it is sub-judice and you cannot get it tilled.'

I laughed and told them, 'I'll be there sharp at nine o'clock to supervise the tilling of the land. I've informed everyone. I don't do anything clandestinely. I announce it to the world. You still have time: today and tonight. If you want, you can get a stay order.'

I paused and then added, 'When Narol court did not issue the order, why didn't you go to the High Court?'

Finally I said in an emotion-laden voice, 'I'm going to get this land tilled. I'll not allow any trading of government land. I want to save the dalits from starvation.'

The lawyers were completely stunned.

Next day I went to the village panchayat's office before 9 o'clock. I found that the talati and the circle inspector had already arrived. They looked tense, as though something untoward was going to happen. There had been a great uproar in the entire village. The village was situated on the highway so many people from the nearby areas had also gathered. I went straight to the pasture. When I reached there, I was astonished to find around 250 women seated, encircling the eight acres of the pasture land. They were on a fast. This was my first encounter with the nastiness of the village people. They were now using women as a cover. I realized that I would have to be very careful in taking any step against the women protesters. A small error could cause serious damage. Even if by accident somebody were to touch a woman, it would have a disastrous fallout. I looked around the pasture and found that the police had taken their position. Then I went to the centre of the land and told Shakrabhai to start tilling. He was in tears and begged me to forget the tilling. He did not want the land and he was worried about me. I told him not to worry

but to get started. But he was very nervous and said that there were too many people present and the women were on a fast and he would be blamed if anything went wrong, adding, 'After that do you think any dalit's life would be spared?' He was far too shaken. I called Shakrabhai's son and told him, 'Your father has lost courage. You pick up the hoe.'

He immediately picked up the hoe and started to till. I only wanted a symbolic tilling of the land so that the people would know the strength of the government and how much it could do for the dalits. I remained there till afternoon. Shakrabhai somehow managed to finish tilling. When he said it was done, I left. After this I went to the office of the panchayat and from there I returned to Dholka.

There were violent repercussions of the news of tilling of the pasture land in the taluka. The villagers' various attempts to stall tilling had proved futile. First, they had roped in the village leaders, then the taluka and the district level leaders, to prevent the work. When this did not help, they went to the secretariat and met the ministers. Now they lost all hope. That night there was an attack on the dalit moholla. Shakrabhai and his son were beaten up. I called for a tighter police protection. I placed one policeman with Shakrabhai and asked him to accompany him everywhere.

Out of desperation, the villagers now decided to use the weapon of hunger strike. They met the collector and said they were going to launch their fast in front of his office. He firmly told them that it would be futile to fast there, because the decision would be taken only at the taluka office. So then they came to Dholka and decided to camp in front of my office and start their fast. They built a huge pandal and around a hundred people went on hunger strike. Many others from Sahij and neighbouring villages joined them. The office compound resembled a big fairground. It also resounded with the slogans denouncing the mamlatdar.

A delegation of their leaders came to me and gave a written complaint, wherein they asked me to take back the order on the pasture. I refused to take back the order. They went back to the pandal. As I have said, the atmosphere inside the

pandal was like that of a fun fair. The leaders came several times to persuade me. They knew very well that I was not going to be convinced, but they kept up their pretence to please those who were fasting. They would come for a while and go back. They did not want to spoil their relationship with me. Around four in the afternoon, someone who had been fasting, came to me and said that a Rabari was complaining of chest pain. He had had a heart attack earlier. He had not eaten anything since the morning and could get another attack.

I immediately telephoned the medical officer. He came and examined the protester and advised him to get admitted in the hospital. But he was adamant and refused to do so. The doctor came and told me that his life was in danger; he needed to be admitted to a hospital. I asked him to do so and when the doctor replied that the man was refusing to be admitted I asked him to get the help of the police. The doctor did not reply and went back to his clinic. Now I started to worry about this person. If anything were to happen to him there would be serious repercussions in the village. The worst sufferer would be the dalits! These were very critical and testing moments of my life. My very existence seemed to be at stake. But I remained firm.

They had started their fast in the morning, and by evening, the pangs of hunger made them uncomfortable. Finally, the head of the taluka panchayat and a few others came to me, and said, 'If you give them some kind of written undertaking, they will give up their fast.'

I refused to give any undertaking, and they went back. After some time they returned. Their leader again asked for something in writing and I said that I would be willing to write that I have received their letter and that I would forward it to the collector for necessary action. They agreed willy-nilly. They were all very hungry and some of them were too distressed to continue the fast. I gave them the letter and their leader said to me, 'Saheb, now you serve them lime juice so that they can break their fast.'

I said, 'I'll not go to the pandal. I can serve them here.'

They all knew me to be very adamant and so they knew that I would not go to them. I served the head and few other leaders lime juice in my office. They broke their fast and then went back to the pandal. Their leader served the drink to the others.

The court proceeding of these cases continued and I often had to be present at the court. Once their lawyer, while the trial was going on, asked me, 'Have you given them this land because you are a dalit?'

The magistrate immediately rebuked him for asking such an improper question. While the cases were being heard in Narol High Court, I got my transfer order.

After many years I met Shakrabhai at the secretariat. He immediately recognized me. He touched my feet and was overjoyed to see me. We met after almost twenty-five years. I did not even know what had happened to those cases of Sahij village. So much must have happened since then! He talked a lot about Dholka. He told me that he had become the deputy sarpanch of the village. I was very happy. He said: 'Saheb, all those cases have been resolved. The verdict on that land near the pond and the pasture was given in my favour. Even in the land record these have been marked under my name.'

I was very happy to know that in spite of the fact that it was panchayat's land the court had allowed a mamlatdar's decision to prevail. In the past it had been held that the mamlatdar had no right to issue the panchayat's land. The panchayat had to pass a resolution stating that the area of pasture was in excess of the total number of cattle in the village and only then that land could be declared as surplus. But even in such a case the mamlatdar had no right to distribute it. It was a question of interpretation of the law. Then I asked about the land on the riverbed and he told me that the verdict, thanks to me, was given in favour of their society.

I asked immediately, 'So have you got possession?'

He paused and then answered, 'We have still not got possession, but then nobody's even thinking about it.'

According to him, though the court verdict was in favour of the dalits, they had not been able to get possession of it. I laughed

and said, 'When I become the collector of Ahmedabad, the first thing I'll do is to give possession of that land to you.'

He laughed. Then I asked him what his sons did. And he said, 'Saheb, one is at the secretariat working as deputy section officer and the other is an inspector in the sales tax department. It's all due to the awakening that you brought to us.'

My joy knew no bounds.

29. Kharanti

One day, around ten in the morning, as I was getting ready to leave for work, a man came to my house in Mahalakshmi Mata ni Pole. He had been trying to find me. He told me that some people had dumped kerosene, crude oil and other filth in the dalits' well at Kharanti village. I knew I had to do something and left for Kharanti immediately where I went straight to the dalit moholla, gathered everyone, and then went to the well side. The well was by the side of a lake. I looked into the well and found a thin film of oil on the water, and when I drew a pot of water from the well, it smelt of kerosene. Everybody in the village denied any knowledge about it; in truth, they did not even cast doubt on anyone. I went to the panchayat office and summoned the sarpanch and the police patel. They too denied any knowledge of it. I took them to the well and said that it was clear that someone in the village had made the well water dirty and it was the responsibility of the sarpanch to get it cleaned up.

Then the sarpanch called some men, and they started to draw water from the well. He got a chair for me, and I sat at the well side, watching the cleaning up procedure. Since the well was near the lake, emptying it was difficult. It was past two in the afternoon

and the job was not yet over. But because I was present, the sarpanch and the police patel could not leave the place. Suddenly the sarpanch had a fainting fit, which led to an elderly dalit telling me that the man was addicted to opium and could not manage without it. I should let him go. Now those who were drawing out the water were very tired, and so the police patel said, 'These people are exhausted. Permit me to call some others from the village.'

Thus more men were called and the work continued. Then the police patel turned to the elderly dalit and said: 'Could you call some of your people from the moholla? We'll pay them.'

The dalits had been quietly watching the well being emptied. I told the police patel that I would not leave till the well had been emptied. With the rest of the villagers, he too was getting restless. It was eight o'clock at night, and the work was not yet over. The police patel and the sarpanch had thought that I would have left within half an hour or once the work had commenced, but I had not budged from there. I was determined to get the dalits clean water that same day. The sarpanch tried to get me tea and lunch, but I refused both and would not even drink water. I did not eat anything the whole day. Around 8 pm I found that the foul smell had considerably decreased and then I was ready to return to Dholka. The dalits invited me to their moholla, and on my arrival, an old man said, 'Saheb, you have not had anything since morning, not even water. Please share a meal with us.'

I told him, 'Do you ever ask yourselves why doesn't anyone dump kerosene and crude oil in the main village well? Why does filth get dumped only in your well? Try to muster up some courage. The day you show courage, I'll come down from Dholka and share a meal with you.'

I turned to the youths and said, 'In school you're taught to be fearless in life, but when you return to the moholla, you forget this lesson. Why don't you form a youth organization and meet two or three times in a week? Once the village people realize that you are united, they'll be scared to throw anything in your well.'

The eyes of all the residents were on me. I noticed a slight spark in their eyes. They held out a glass of milk to me. I drank the milk

to please them, and then left for Dholka. When I was passing by the well I saw the lights of a jeep approaching. It stopped and the deputy superintendent of police (DYSP) got down from it. He told me that he had been informed that I had been in the area since the morning and had come to find out what had happened. I told him in detail what had happened and left while he drove on to the village. Later the police confiscated all the arms from the village. The DYSP had done what he thought was his duty that night. On the third day after the incident, I read the following headline in the newspaper: 'Official Atrocities Need to Be Probed'

It described the incident at the well in detail and stated that if the incident was not probed, the people of Kharanti would be forced to migrate from their village with their cattle and resources. The villagers also sent in a petition to the chief minister with a copy to Jhinabhai Darji—a member of the Congress Party. Until now only dalits migrated, now it seemed the people of Kharanti were ready to migrate!

Dalpatbhai Shrimali, the editor of *Garuda*, read this news and came to Dholka to probe the matter. He went back and wrote in the editorial, 'What kind of reporting is this? Without bothering to verify the facts, this newspaper has published this reportage. Its intention is only to defame an honest dalit officer.' He published a photocopy of an earlier piece in the same newspaper, where it had reported how, with the help of this same dalit officer, the people of Dholka were paying less for edible oil. He added, 'When entire Gujarat was paying a higher price for oil, the residents of Dholka paid less.' Thus, through his editorial he exposed the newspaper's intention. It only proved that the print media was not above prejudice.

Dalpatbhai Shrimali lived in the Gandhi Ashram and was a fearless reporter. I became a lifetime subscriber of *Garuda*. Once he sent a telegram asking me to come immediately to Ahmedabad. He had also called Rameshchandra Parmar, the president of Gujarat Dalit Panther and Valjibhai Patel from the Social Justice Committee. He was passing through a trying time. He had documented the corruption in the ashram in his book *Gandhi Ashram or Eden of Corruption?* It was indeed a tough task to write and publish such a book residing in the ashram. He was asked to

vacate his house and there were threatening calls. A case had also been registered against him. He wanted to discuss this matter with us. When I reached his home, the others had left. We discussed the issue at length. The same Dalpatbhai has been honoured by the Gujarat government two years back with the Dr. Ambedkar Award, which also carried a cash prize of one lakh rupees.

30.Vataman

Vataman is situated on the banks of the Sabarmati. It is believed that the legendary outlaw, Bhupat, had once spent a night in this village. Some bullies in this village were harassing the dalits. One day, I got the news that somebody had thrown kerosene and crude oil in the dalits' well. By the time I got the news it was very late but I immediately rushed there with the taluka development officer (TDO) and the sub inspector of police. By the time we reached it was night but even so I called a meeting of the villagers. The TDO and the subinspector denounced this act as abhorrent, especially in a civilized society, and urged the people to live in peace and harmony. I advised the dalits to fight against such atrocities. But nobody owned up to the misdeed. I instructed the sub inspector to confiscate all arms. I implored both the parties to come to an agreement to bring back peace and harmony in the village. I did this because I knew that in the end the dalits always had to give in to survive.

I remember the bridge at Vataman very clearly because after it was built the government found that no steps had been built on either side of it, so it was difficult to get access to it. However, soon the river changed its course, and so the steps were never

built. What a wasteful expenditure! I remember I used to call it 'the bridge without river' after the famous movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In the same village once I had to give judgement on a case filed by a Rajput claiming a piece of government land to be his. After listening to the pleadings of the lawyers on both sides I gave the verdict in favour of the government, referring to rule 37(2) of the Land Revenue Code. Later. I wanted to give this piece of land to a person from the Valmiki community but he was afraid to take possession of it. Soon after this incident, I was transferred and so I do not know what happened to this land.

After the incident of the well at Vataman I advised the dalit youths of the surrounding villages—Varna, Moti Boru, Nani Boru—to organize into groups. They followed my advice and formed societies and took up the problems of their community. They often consulted me and kept me informed about their activities. Gradually a new awareness came about among the dalits, and thereafter no incident of harassment was reported from any of these villages. After many years I met Kalubhai Makwana of Moti Boru village at a function. I was happy to note that he was the chairman of the social justice committee of the district panchayat and had set up many developmental organizations in Ahmedabad. We talked about my days in Dholka and in the end he added, 'I was a kid when you were mamlatdar in Dholka. You inspired us to form groups in villages. Whatever I have achieved is because of you.'

31. Bagodara

Bagodara today is much more developed than it was when I was in Dholka. Then it was just a dusty little village. Today, it is known as the gateway to Saurastra. During those days, Bagodara and the surrounding villages faced severe water scarcity. Every summer I had to send water tankers to this area. People dug wells in the dry bed of the lake. These wells had lids with a padlock to prevent water theft. When I visited the dalits to find out about their conditions they had tears in their eyes. They said, 'Saheb, though we have dug a separate well in the lake, some of the village people draw water from it at night.'

What kind of hypocrisy was this? The higher caste people practised untouchability during the daytime and the same people stole water at night from the well of the untouchables! A mere touch of a dalit was considerèd to be polluting, but the bullies of the village did not hesitate to enter the dalit moholla at night and rape a woman in front of her husband and the in-laws! The talati told me of these incidents, but when I asked him for the names of the perpetrators, he was afraid to divulge them. I also heard of an incident that took place in Bagodara where a couple had been abducted at night and the wife was raped in front of the husband. How many such cases must be gathering dust in the police station? Though the tyrannous rule of the British has ended, people were still terrified; they trembled like leaves in a storm in the presence of the toughies of the villages.

Once I was visiting a village near Bagodara to inspect the relief work. Some of the dalits came and complained to me about a person who was harassing them. Because of the drought the

government had provided relief work to the villagers. A person had been appointed to carry potable water to the relief workers and he was paid on a daily basis. This person did not let the dalits drink this water. He also bothered the dalit women labourers. I was furious. I went straight to him, caught him by his collar, and shoved him in my jeep and brought him to the government rest house in Bagodara. The news spread in the village and the sarpanch of Bagodara came to meet me. It was only after he gave an undertaking that he would watch this man's conduct that I let him go.

32. Valthera

Government areas in rural India are divided into different categories depending on their use: cultivable land; threshing fields; pasture; lake and so on. These categories had been made by the British, and the areas continue to be demarcated thus, though many of these uses have now become redundant because of the mechanization of agriculture. As a result, a vast area remains uncultivated, which the influential people of the village usurp, and the government is deprived of any revenue from it. If this land were given to the deprived and the oppressed class of the society like dalits and tribals, the government would not only gain financially; it would also ease the problem of unemployment. Cultivation of these lands would also ensure enough fodder for the cattle. Unfortunately, rigid adherence to an outdated norm has turned thousands of acres of cultivable land into waste land.

The dalits of Valthera had requested the panchayat to allot them the threshing field so that they could build houses. For years the panchayat took no action and so the dalits came to me. I was

aware that the panchayat had not passed a resolution on this matter. But I sent in an application with my recommendation to the collector, requesting him to grant this land to the dalits. The collector came down to Valthera to appraise the situation. After inspecting the site, he discussed the matter with me at the resthouse. He pointed out that the panchayat had not passed the resolution. I told him that no panchayat would pass a resolution on land allotment if it benefited the dalits. The collector was taken aback. I added, 'Sir, dalits do not have adequate space to build houses, and the threshing field is lying unused. Moreover, the government has a housing scheme for them whereby they could be allotted 100 square yards of land.'

The collector returned to Ahmedabad and after sometime, in spite of the absence of a panchayat resolution, he sanctioned the threshing field to the dalits. I was happy that I was able to fulfil at least one demand of the dalits. I gave them this good news.

After sometime I was surprised to find a large group of dalits from Valthera in my office. I wondered what could have now gone wrong. They told me that though they had received the sanction, the cost of the land was too high for them.

The cost had been kept at Re.1 per square yard. But the dalit housing society members were very poor. They barely earned enough to survive, so how could they find even this small extra amount? We need to keep in mind that though the value of a rupee today is as small as a shirt button, in 1970, its value was as large as a cartwheel! I knew that their complaint was just, but I could not change anything once the collector had given out the order. My role could now be of an adviser. I asked them to appeal against the collector's order. They were startled at the word 'appeal' because they knew it meant costs of going to court, and hiring a lawyer. I assured them and asked them to send the appeal to the special secretary.

I also asked them somehow to ensure that the file came back to me for re-examination. I gave them the name of an IAS officer who could help them. They registered their appeal, and fortunately the papers came back to me. I immediately made an application in which I wrote:

> The government has introduced a housing scheme for the dalits in which 100 square yards of land is given free of cost to them. In the light of this the demand of the dalits of Valthera to allot the threshing land is justified because they are going to use this land only for housing purpose. But the cost of Re.1 per square yard is too steep for these applicants. If the government does not wish to give them land free of cost, it could charge them a nominal fee of paise 10 per square yard.

After sometime, the government agreed and sanctioned my demand of giving them land at paise 10. The dalits were overjoyed. But the saddest part was even the cost of paise 10 was high for this group. For all the time I was in Dholka no house had been built on this land, and today after 30 years I wonder how many houses must have been built!

33. Chandisar

Once, the dalits of Chandisar submitted an application to the collector, stating, 'Kindly allot us either the waste land or any other land that is lying fallow in the village.' When the villagers came to know about this application, they attacked the dalit moholla at night. They broke the tiles of some of the houses and beat up many dalits badly. The dalits in turn lodged a complaint against the villagers.

As soon as I came to know about this incident, I went to Chandisar. I first visited the dalit moholla. They informed me that there was fallow land in the village that belonged to the

government but the panchayat deliberately marked it as pasture so that it could not be allotted to the dalits. I assured them of my help, and then I went to the Rajput's mohoila. It was eight at night and I was without any escort. When I talked to the leader of the Rajputs, he said, 'The dalits have lodged a false complaint against my people.' I replied that there was no proof and he had denied that the Rajputs were implicated but I had indeed seen the broken tiles. Thus could he still insist that their complaint was false?

There was complete silence. I added, 'Remember the dalits are not helpless any more. If I deem it necessary, I'll bring the entire state police force here. Then you call your braves to face them.'

I returned to Dholka the same night, but the dalits' trouble did not end. They were not given work on the farms. Some of the dalits had small plots of agricultural land where they had grown cotton. After a few days these people came to me and said that the standing crop had been pulled out from their fields. When I asked them if they had lodged a complaint with the police, they replied that they had but the police had not believed them and said instead that they had grown no crops. Now I was in a dilemma. The dalits had already sent in a similar complaint to the collector. I asked them to hand over another complaint to the collector personally. The collector assigned the investigation to the deputy collector of Dholka. He could have assigned this task to me, but he did not because I was a dalit.

The deputy collector called me to her office. I said, 'The standing cotton crops of the dalit farmers have been pulled out.'

She took me to the village. I found that the crops had been pulled out so neatly that not a stump remained. The situation was like a Hindi thriller film. The deputy collector too was convinced that no crops had been grown there, and that the dalits had made a false allegation. Then I showed her the piles of weeds on the sides of the farm and said, 'Why would any one weed a farm unless there is a crop in it? Weeding is done for the better growth of the crop. The piles of weed at the sides are a clear indication that this farm had

been weeded but the farmer forgot to carry the weed away. Moreover, look at the weeds that have grown on the edges of the field. From the height of the weed the height of the crop can be gauged. The weeds that had grown between the plants have been removed and these have been piled up at the sides at some distance.'

The deputy collector seemed to be convinced by my reasoning. She saw that the entire field was without any plants, not even a blade of grass. If there was no cotton crop in it, then it would at least have some grass. Only if there were a crop, the dalits would have weeded the farm. A river flowed at some distance from the place. Perhaps they had thrown the plants in the river or hidden it somewhere. The deputu collector was now completely convinced. A dalit farmer informed her, 'We had found some pulled-out cotton stalks on the bank of the river.'

'Can you show us?'

He answered, 'How can they be still there?'

The minute the culprits came to know about the enquiry, the stalks must have been removed. Thus, in spite of an enquiry, no steps could be taken.

34. *Chaloda–Varna*

The sarpanch and the police patel are the most powerful village officials in rural Gujarat. The sarpanch's is an elected post, and thus for the dalits it is impossible to aspire to it. The police patel functions closely with the police department, but he is not a part of the police force, and to qualify for this post one has to apply to the collector's office. It was an important post during the British rule. I wanted a dalit youth from the taluka to hold this position. I asked some of the youths, but none was ready to risk the wrath of the village. Then, one day, a dalit worker of Chaloda village came to meet me. He was dressed in a Gandhi-style khadi jacket and a white cap. He had come to discuss the issues related to the dalits. He also spoke about dalit emancipation. I said, 'We should first set our house in order.' Then I suggested that he should apply for the post of police patel, and he readily agreed. I had thought that as a social worker he had been exposed to the outside world and hence would not face any difficulty. I advised him to meet his leaders in the moholla and discuss and get their assurance that if he were to face any problem they would support him.

He came back the next day and filled out the application. I approved it and sent it off to the collector's office. The collector gave his sanction and the post was given to the social worker who was overjoyed.

After about a week, he was back in my office. He looked disturbed and said he wanted to resign from the post. I tried to assure him of full support and cooperation, but he was adamant.

He refused to give any reason for his resignation. I was aware that Chaloda had a large population of the Patels. So how would these people accept a dalit as the police patel? Despite the presence of a large population of educated dalits, this person had bowed down to pressure. I suspected that somebody must have threatened him. I was disappointed, but I did not force him to remain in the post.

I found out that even the Koli Patels had not been able to put anybody from their community in this post in the taluka. The Koli Patels belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and I always took keen interest in the development of the backward classes. Then one day Parshottam Mackwana told me that he wanted somebody from his community to hold the post of police patel. He was a Koli Patel himself and had become the sarpanch of Bagodara. When a post fell vacant at Varana village, I informed him about it. He convinced a person from his community to apply for the post. The Rajputs were very influential in Varana, and they did not like the idea of a Koli Patel becoming a police patel. There was strong opposition against this candidate, but because he had the full support of Parshottam Mackwana and other leaders of his community both at the village and taluka level, he could not be dislodged. This incident made me realize the importance of community support. A dalit police patel could not carry out his duty and had to resign because he had no support whereas a Koli Patel withstood all obstacles only because of the strong backing of his community.

35. *Dumali*

One day a police constable came to my office and gave me the following news: The Rajputs and the Bharvads were on the warpath in Dumali and firings had taken place. As an executive magistrate I needed to look into the matter. I left for Dumali immediately.

Around 60 acres of land, which had earlier belonged to the Rajputs were now under government possession after the Land Ceiling Act. I had tried to allot this land to the dalits but there were no takers because the dalits were scared of the Rajputs and did not want to incur their wrath, and this land was then allotted to the Rabaris and Bharvads. But even they could not cultivate it. Whenever they tried to till the land, the Rajputs would threaten them with guns. Once when these people attempted to till the land the Rajputs fired their guns. The matter came to blows but fortunately no lives were lost.

I reached Dumali and listened to both the groups. I tried to explain the law to the Rajputs, but they were adamant. The Bharvads too were firm. I remembered the words of Navalbhai Shah who had once told me, 'The Rajputs of Dumali will never allow the Bharvads to cultivate this land. We should divide the land equally between them and resolve the problem.'

I replied, 'I'm helpless. After the land ceiling act has declared this land to be surplus it has been allotted to the Bharvads and so nothing can be done with it now.'

Finally the issue went to the sub divisional magistrate.

This incident set me thinking. If such a strong community like the Bharvads could not cultivate this land, then how could

the dalits of Dumali even think of doing it? What was more shocking was that such a thing had happened in a village in Ahmedabad district. The secretariat was in Ahmedabad at that time, and the city also boasted of the Schedule Class Federation of Dr. Ambedkar. The Federation was very active and there was a great deal of awareness among the dalits of the district. Yet the dalits of Dumali refused to accept the land. What would then be the condition of the dalits far away from Ahmedabad, in the remote parts of the state?

36. Meethapur-Rohika-Seemaj

A job in the revenue department can sometimes mean handling many challenging tasks. Besides handling the complex work of the Census or the elections one also has to manage tough tasks brought on by natural calamities like drought, flood, fire and accidents. Now communal riots and other political agitations have been added to this list. At such trying times an executive magistrate has to carry out his duty with tact and ingenuity. During my tenure in Dholka from 1969 to 1973, the taluka had elections, Census numeration, drought, flood, communal riots, and a political agitation like the Navnirman movement. Geographically, Dholka taluka is uniquely positioned. Sometimes when one part of the taluka is reeling under the impact of floods because the Sabarmati River is in spate, the other part faces severe drought. Very often, I had to handle relief work for these two diverse calamities simultaneously. After working late in the night, overseeing the drought relief work, I would come back home when I would get a wireless message from the other side of the taluka that flooding was imminent and would rush immediately to evacuate people

from the villages. Finally, I would end up spending the night evacuating people.

Once when I went to warn the people of Sahij and Santhal villages, I was trapped by the floodwaters and somehow managed to escape. I could hear the screams of people from the opposite bank. Another time the collector's office rang me up and asked me to find out about the state of the people in one of the villages in Maatar taluka who were trapped by the flood. They said they were not able to establish any contact with them. I decided to visit the place. I did not have a jeep and so I called up the state transport authority and asked them to provide a bus. I reached Vataman by bus and from there walked down to the river bank. The river was in spate, but I hired a boat and reached the other side. I could see the helicopters in the sky. I walked from the river bank to the village and to my great relief I found that the villagers were unaffected by floods and were busy enjoying a village fair.

My job also involved attending to dignitaries especially during crisis situations. Once when the taluka experienced serious floods, prime minister Indira Gandhi and the chief minister Mr. Hitendrabhai Desai visited Dholka. They arrived in a helicopter and a meeting was arranged at the panchayat office, and I then apprised them about the situation. The taluka's diverse population often resulted in many serious law and order problems. The large population of Rajputs, Bharvads and Koli Patels in the taluka often clashed, as I have described earlier, over land related matters, and I also had to respond to the complaints from the dalits of different villages that the other caste people had soiled their wells by throwing kerosene, crude oil or some filth. Finally, the taluka also had a dacoit menace. A dacoit community, the Dafers, carried out their nefarious activities in the taluka and I also had to attend to this problem.

Because of my literary interests, I coined two names to distinguish the two parts of the taluka: the land of mirage and the land of the roses. In the bright sunlight the vast expanse of the saline fields of the Bhalkantha region appeared like a sea; but there was no real water there. Our literature abounds in allusions of mirage, but it was only when I came here that I actually experienced

it. The other part of the taluka, the one that I called the land of roses, comprised the villages along the banks of the Sabarmati. There were large rose plantations where the labourers picked roses throughout the night so that the flowers could be sent early next morning to the wholesale flower market in Ahmedabad. I enjoyed walking in the rose fields. Often my pace would be arrested by a thorn caught in my shirt tail and when I bent down to free it, the soft touch of the rose petals would send a strange thrill down my body. The first consignment of the picked flowers from Nesda village arrived at three in the morning, which were then loaded in taxis and despatched to Ahmedabad. The second consignment was sent at five in the morning.

I have witnessed many human migrations. Every year I saw the Maldharis wander with their cattle from village to village. I have deep sympathy for any kind of migration—human or cattle—because I have known and read about dalit migrations. Once during a drought year, the revenue minister Premjibhai Thakkar decided to shift the cattle from Kutch and Banaskantha region to the Surat and Valsad region. The reason for this decision was that though it would be easier to transport fodder to Kutch, it was not possible to carry the large volume of water for the cattle at such a distance. It was decided to build fodder depots every ten kilometres from Kutch and Banaskantha to Surat and Valsad. These depots had to be supplied with adequate fodder and water so that the cattle could stop every ten kilometres for food and drink in their migratory track. Once they reached the green pasture land of the Surat-Valsad region, they would be kept there till the first showers of the monsoon when they would once again return to their original place. It was my task to oversee this migration of cattle. I was given the charge of three fodder depots where around 80,000 cattle were to be fed and taken care of. This proved a unique experience for me. I was able to observe closely the physiognomy of the cattle and I saw the dust that cows' hooves raised at dusk while returning from pastures, which had given us the term *godhuli*—the 'cow-dust' time. I had read a great deal about godhuli in literature, but here I was immersed in it. I remember how often I had accidentally put my foot in fresh cow dung! At such times, I remembered Kakasaheb Kalelkar's essay

Joy at Noon, where he has described how walking barefoot in the scorching mid-day sun it was so tempting to plonk one's feet in the fresh cow dung. At such times one does not get repulsed or feel that the act is improper. The sense of cleanliness also gets blunted! I have spoken of how when I was a little boy, I roamed in the fields carrying a wicker basket to collect a few lumps of dung. Often, when I was caught 'stealing' lumps of dung from the farms I used to be cursed and beaten up by the farmers. Once in my haste to grab the dung, I had mistaken a coiled snake to be a lump of dung and was about to pick it up when it straightened and slithered past like the floodwaters. Today I was surrounded by several lumps of dung.

Of the three fodder depots in Dholka taluka, one was located in Meethapur. The cattle came from Limbdi taluka to Meethapur depot. We had no problem providing adequate bundles of fodder for the cattle. However, Meethapur had severe water scarcity and every summer we had to provide potable water through tankers. The little water that was in the village lake was kept for the village cattle and even this water would turn saline after sometime. The villagers refused to allow this water to be used for the migratory cattle. Their protest was just, because if whatever little water was available were given to the cattle of Kutch-Banaskantha, their own cattle would die of thirst. The population of the village comprised mainly of Bharvads, dalits and Koli Patels. There were some people in the village who were responsible for theft, arson and rape. The condition of the dalits was pitiable and some of them complained that the other villagers prevented them from drawing water from the lake for their use. When I persuaded the villagers to share lake water for the cattle depot, they agreed but refused to allow any share from it for the dalits. So I instructed the driver of the tanker to carry the potable water first to the dalit moholla and only then to other areas. The fodder depot in Meethapur got started.

The second depot was located in Rohika village. Rohika too like Meethapur had poor soil. The salinity was so high that in summer the salt created mirage-like images. In a land where there was almost no water for the humans, how could we procure it for the animals? I located a private bore well at the roadside.

When I approached its owner, he refused saying, 'There is just enough for my fields and my cattle. If I give you water, what will happen to my cattle?' He was also displeased with the Maldharis because they used to let their cattle into his fields. After a great deal of persuasion he allowed us to draw water from his well. The third depot was opened at Simej village. The village lake was selected for procuring water. Thus all the three depots were set up with adequate fodder and water.

Around 80,000 cattle passed through these three depots, and much of my time was spent on not only looking after the arrangement for the cattle, but also in ensuring the well-being of their owners, the Maldharis. Some were very influential because they knew the minister. If there was even a slight delay in getting the fodder, they threatened the officials by saying, 'We'll have to report to Premji.' Fortunately, the employees in the depots carried out their duty diligently and there was no scope of any irregularities. But this did not stop the faultfinders from sending in their complaints. Inquiries were carried out but no irregularity could be established.

One night when I came to inspect the depot in Rohika, some of the Maldharis informed me that their cattle had contracted smallpox. I became very anxious and immediately informed the headquarters. I also rang up the director of the animal husbandry department. He quickly sent a team of veterinary doctors. Once the fact was established, it was decided to vaccinate the cattle. But there were not enough vaccines to cover all the cattle. The vaccines were flown from Ijjatnagar and timely inoculation of the cattle helped avert a disastrous epidemic.

Travelling 10 km every day took a toll on the weaker cows. Many collapsed on the way and some old ones even died. The rotting corpses of cows gave out a foul smell. These deaths often got misreported in the newspaper. The reporters blamed lack of adequate supply of fodder to be the cause of these deaths. Complaints were filed and an enquiry was held. But it is not always possible to hide the truth. There were constant conflicts between the Maldharis and the local farmers. The Maldharis would push their cattle into the fields of the local farmers and this often led to serious scuffles. Once when I was informed of

a fight in Simej, I hurried there and managed to end the conflict after a great deal of persuasion.

One day I received a telephone call from the collector. He said, 'We have to form a *gokul* or settlement for 200 cows in Dholka.' Some of the Maldharis had complained that their cattle were not able to cover 10 km every day and as a result many of them had become weak. Hence it was decided to build settlements where they would be kept till the monsoon. One such gokul would be in Dholka. I first approached the leaders of the town and various heads of the non-government organizations. Nobody was willing to take the responsibility of this task. They complained about the misbehaviour and arrogance of the Maldharis. Though their complaints were justified, it was a government order and somehow I had to start the settlement. I was apprehensive about how it would work out. Then I met Sikandarkhan Pathan, a Muslim. He agreed to take up the task. There is a large Muslim population in Dholka taluka. The city of Dholka has around 40 per cent Muslim population and some of the villages are predominately Muslim. The wounds of the 1969 communal riots were still fresh and so a cattle settlement by a Muslim seemed unfeasible. Moreover, the government was going to pay for the fodder only after the viability of the settlement had been ensured. So a large amount had to be invested to buy fodder to start the settlement and the fodder was scarce even against cash in a drought situation. But Sikandarkhan was ready to take the risk. Many cautioned him of losing his capital and incurring debt, but he was determined to carry out the task. It was decided to situate the settlement in the field behind my office, because there was adequate supply of water, and also because I would be able to keep an eye on any irregularities taking place.

What started off as a settlement for 200 cattle, gradually increased to 500, and I continued to get calls from the secretariat to increase the number. The Maldharis too would go straight to the secretariat to get permission to keep their cattle here. Many influential Maldharis returned from Ahmedabad and Vadodara as soon as they heard that a settlement had been built in Dholka. As a result, the number of cattle increased to 5000. We had to provide three kilos of fodder

everyday to the cattle. How was I going to procure so much fodder? And where was I going to house all these cattle? The cattle roamed all around the compound of my office. Now there were more cattle than human beings. The Maldharis slept, spreading their headgear either in the compound or near my chamber. I had to jump over them to enter or go out of my office. I felt I too had become a cowherd. It was so crowded that I could not go home for lunch and my wife started sending my lunch to my office. It was quite a difficult task to provide fodder and water to such a large number of cattle. Some cattle were sent to the nearby pond for water. Sikandarkhan deployed extra men for the distribution of fodder. Maldharis were very satisfied with the work of Sikandarkhan and he too worked day and night to serve the Maldharis. Our hard work paid off and soon the first showers arrived.

With the onset of the monsoon, the next task I faced was to send home these cattle. With an assured supply of fodder and water, many of the Maldharis were not in a hurry to return home. But some were eager to get back to their families and kith and kin. Finally, the time came for them to leave and I decided to organize a farewell function. I held the function in a nearby cinema hall. A lunch of bajra rotlo with fresh butter and ladvo was served to the cattle owners and we also had a special farewell meal for the cattle. Many dignitaries like the revenue minister Premjibhai Thakker, director, relief works, and the collector attended the function. Maldhari leaders and other influential people of Kutch also came down to attend the function. Many eloquent speeches were made on the occasion, but I decided to refrain from delivering any speech, and instead read a poem that I had composed for the occasion. I remember it was called *A Farewell to the Cows* and even today I can recite two lines from it:

Though I sang no song of welcome
I sing a song of adieu.

Drought management is always a very demanding job. I had constantly to ensure that everybody got enough rations on time, the labourers were paid adequately, and there were no irregularities

or black marketing on the part of the traders. It is very easy to find faults with the relief work and often I too had to answer many queries alleging irregularities in my work. Once I remember the deputy director of the relief works came from the secretariat to make enquiries. I challenged him to find any irregularity in my department, and said that I would resign if I were found guilty. Mr. Patel went around ten villages but could find no wrongdoings. He wrote a favourable report of my work and submitted it to the government.

37. Bhumli

One day, I was about to leave for a tour of the district and my driver had just switched on the ignition of the jeep when a white kurta-pajama clad person approached me and said, 'Saheb, I'm from Dhandhuka. The dalit farmers of Dholka and Dhandhuka have formed an agricultural cooperative. We have located government land in the village of Bhumli. We would like you to lease this land to us for a year. Here is my application.'

I read the letter sitting in my jeep and asked him how much land was available and he told me it was around 350 acres. I asked him if the survey number quoted was correct and he replied that it was so and he had checked with the talati.

'If I give you the land, will you till it?'

'Definitely.'

I got down from the jeep and went back to my office and called the deputy mamlatdar. I gave him the application and said, 'Prepare a one-year lease order for this land and give it to him right now.'

The deputy mamlatdar looked at me in astonishment. I asked him to read the application. After reading the application, he replied, 'Sir, it does not carry the stamp of being checked or

endorsed by the talati. How do we know that much land is available? We do not even know whether the survey number mentioned in the application is correct.'

Now it was my turn to be surprised. The deputy mamlatdar was right. The land could be allotted only after checking the details. I said, 'Don't worry. You prepare the allotment paper.'

But he still hesitated. He kept shifting his glance, looking at the application and then at me. I understood his dilemma and told him, 'All right, what you can do is get the order typed but don't put anyone's signature on it.'

The order came to me for signing. It carried no signature—neither the clerk nor the deputy mamlatdar had signed it. I signed the order of allotment of 150 acres of land to be given for a period of one year to the applicant. The applicant was overjoyed; he had never dreamt of getting the land so easily. He knew that if his application had been sent for verification then it would have taken anywhere from few months to a year!

After handing over the order I left for the tour of the district. Next day, a group comprising the sarpanch, the police patel and the leaders of Bhumli visited my office. I now saw that many of the influential people of the village had been cultivating this land illegally, and the issuance of this order placed them in a tight situation. They had come to resolve the issue. They requested me to distribute the land between the dalits and the rest of the village people. I was against any kind of settlement of government land. I asked them to go back to Bhumli and talk it out with the dalits, and then come back with a proposal, bringing the dalits with them too. I knew that their talking to the dalits would mean threatening them. But I wanted to find out what kind of a settlement proposal they would work out with the dalits. So far, nobody had ever bothered to take the consent of the dalits in any matter, and I wanted to initiate a negotiation process with the dalits in the village. I have never allowed any settlement of any government land, and I was not going to do that with the land in Bhumli.

The incident in Bhumli and the one in Sahij that I have already discussed instilled a scare among the farmers indulging in illegal cultivation of land. Allowing the cultivation of pasture and the allotment of the government land in Bhumli to the dalits had a

good fall out in the taluka. After these incidents whenever a sarpanch wanted to get any work done in the village he would come to me, and first state,. 'Saheb, the dalits in our village are facing the following problems.'

Then they would broach the main issue. Some ten sarpanchs came to me with a proposal of allotting a portion of the pasture from their village to the dalits. I sent in ten such applications from the panchayats of Pisavada, Sathal and eight other villages with my signature to the collector, who with one stroke of his pen rejected all these applications. He wrote, 'The applications are rejected because in all these cases the land is less in proportion to cattle.'

The panchayat in the past was blamed for not granting land to the dalits. But in these cases, in spite of the panchayats' approval, the collector had rejected the proposal.

38. Shiyal-Dharji

I remember an amusing incident with the chief secretary, Lalitchandra Dalal. In 1970 it was reported that around one lakh people in the district of Ernakulam in Kerala had undergone sterilization. The chief secretary wanted a similar figure for Gujarat. He decided to tour all the districts of Gujarat. When he came to Dholka with Kamalben Naik, Ahmadabad district panchayat's family planning officer, I had just completed the collection levy of paddy. When he came to know that I had successfully met the target, he asked me to work on the family planning project. I said lightly, 'Sir, I wish you had told me a little early.'

He looked at me in astonishment and said, 'Why?'

I answered, 'I've just finished collecting the levy. If you had told me earlier I would have used this as an incentive for getting their levy reduced.'

Everybody laughed uproariously. The deputy collector, Gitaben Desai, was seated next to me. She turned to me and said, 'As a mamlatdar you should know your place. You shouldn't joke with the chief secretary. Don't you know what he is like?'

Lalitchandra Dalal was a strict disciplinarian and it was unheard of in those days for a mamlatdar to joke like this with the chief secretary. In fact, a mamlatdar was not supposed to open his mouth in front of the chief secretary! This was my first posting and being a direct recruit I was not well versed in the finer points of protocols of the revenue department, and because I had said it in a lighter vein nobody took it amiss. However, I promised him that I would meet the target set by him, and I did.

First, I made a list of the villages where no cases of family planning had been registered. I found that in some villages like Shiyal, Dharji and Meni there had not been a single case. Most of these villages were situated on the road connecting Bagodara to Nalsarovar and had a large population of the Padhhar tribe. Dharji was a Padhhar village. The literacy rate was very low and this was the prime reason for not adopting family planning. Their headman lived in Shiyal and many district officials including the collector and the chairman of the district panchayat had tried in vain to persuade him, but it had yielded no result. When I first tried to convince him, I did not succeed. Then I called the village official and tried to persuade him. He too gave the standard reply, 'Saheb, I know you have our welfare in mind but our people are illiterate and so nobody listens to me.'

I told him, 'Why don't you ask your elder son to adopt family planning? It is such a simple procedure. He won't even feel any pain. You can find out from the others who have done this.'

His son was with him and without waiting for a reply he just fled the scene. I returned to Dholka. I realized that these people were devoted blindly to their Goddess, Mataji, and

somebody had spread the word that she was against family planning. I deliberated for sometime on how I could spread awareness among them and collected more information about their religious beliefs. The Padhhars are considered to be a 'primitive' tribe. I was very sympathetic to them and I did not want to do anything by force. I wanted to find a way keeping in mind their beliefs.

During the monsoon, their huts would get inundated and the stagnant water bred mosquitoes and disease. The huts were circular and around eight to ten members of the family lived in each. They were dismally poor and survived on wild roots. Most of their fields got flooded with saline water during the monsoon, so they could not grow anything in it. Only on a small patch of good land could they grow a grain called bunty and some jowar. In summer, the salt in the soil created a mirage-like image and the entire area looked like a wide sea. The only tree that grew was gando babool and that too very sparsely. Their livelihood depended on selling roasted thek: a wild grain that passed off as roasted jowar at Ahmedabad's roadsides. They also fished and hunted black duck in Nalsarovar Lake. The youths hunted these birds at night because hunting was prohibited in the lake. They would spend two to three hours risking their lives in the dark and at times some died of snakebite. This profession became very risky after Nalsarovar was declared a reserved forest area. They lost an important means of livelihood. Sometimes they would hunt clandestinely but if they were caught they were beaten up very badly.

How was I to explain the advantages of adopting family planning to this community immersed in blind faith and ignorance? I decided to adopt a different strategy. I knew that they would not listen to the collector, but I was sure that they would listen to the bhuva—their medicine man—and I met him. But he refused to listen to any talk regarding family planning. Then one day I called him to the panchayat office and welcomed him warmly. I praised him and talked to him in a friendly manner. No government official, not even the local ones, had behaved or talked to him with such kindness and affection. His ego got a boost and gradually I established good rapport with

him. I gifted him a transistor radio with a sling case so that he could carry it on his shoulder when he went to the fields. A transistor radio was an unimaginable luxury for the Padhhars. The government had an incentive scheme of gifting transistors to the motivator and the participants of the Family Planning Programme. There were other incentives from the taluka and district panchayats. Some of the NGOs also had been roped into this project. The NGOs used to give them cash, blankets and utensils. In spite of such incentives, there were no takers for family planning.

I played the radio and told the bhuva, 'You don't have to get operated.' He was very happy and he was now completely under my influence. I then asked him to throw the grains and read the message of Mataji in the grains. He looked at the door and I closed it immediately. He threw the grains and turned to me and said, 'Yes, Mataji has given her consent.'

I was very cautious. I wanted him to say this publicly. I tempted him with the offer of a second radio, telling him that if he had two, his son could have one for himself. I then said, 'I'm not asking you or your son to undergo this operation. All you have to do is to throw the grains and read out the message to the others that Mataji has said that all except the family of bhuva are free to get themselves operated.'

Now he was completely convinced. I decided to leave the village immediately because I did not want anybody in the village, especially the Padhhars, to have any inkling of my involvement in the matter. I explained everything to the talati and the social worker, Baldevbhai, because they were residents of the village. I was sure of the result.

At midnight the bhuva threw the grains in front of Mataji's idol and, in the presence of the leaders of that community and others, he read the following message: 'Mataji has given her consent for the operation to all except the bhuva and his family.'

After this, as instructed, the talati and Baldevbhai took up the responsibility of getting the names of the people willing to undergo the operation. Next day there were about 69 people from Shiyal who gave their names. A special bus was

hired to take all these people to the government hospital in Bavla where the procedure was going to be done. When the busload of people arrived at Bavla, there was an air of festivity all around. The taluka and the district officials were astonished to find that suddenly there was such a large registration from Shiyal on a single day when so far not one case had been registered. Thereafter, I toured Dharji, Meni and other villages and met the family planning target set for the taluka. The taluka panchayat gave me a wall clock worth Rs. 200 and the district panchayat a steel water jug worth Rs. 250 as reward at a special function.

I was always deeply interested in Family Planning Programme. I understand the significance of this national level project launched to control the rapid population growth in the country. Overpopulation not only harms a citizen at a personal level but it also affects the growth of a nation. All developmental projects become ineffective in the face of overpopulation. Its adverse effects are unemployment, poverty, theft and, finally, rioting. That is why I married late in 1964 and we waited to have our first child who was born in 1970 when I was thirty.

In the later stage of my career, when I was the district planning officer at Palanpur, I was once again given the charge of handling the Family Planning Programme in Diyodar taluka in Banaskantha district. As a deputy collector of Banaskantha district I had to take on some additional responsibilities. First, I was asked to take the charge of looking after the scarcity affected areas of Danta taluka and then I was given the additional responsibility of Kankrej and Diyodar talukas. It seemed as if the reward of my efficiency was additional work. I ended up looking after almost half the district. Finally in December, I was asked by the district development officer, Mr. Jagadisan, to take the charge of Family Planning Programme in Palanpur Taluka. After I took over, there was a rapid increase in the registration for the family planning camp organized at Palanpur. The camp registered around 500 cases; earlier the numbers had never been so high. The collector, Tripathi, was very impressed by my performance. He called me to his office and said, 'Jadav, in the last ten years Diyodar taluka has never met the target of

Family Planning Programme. I want you to take charge of this taluka's Family Planning Programme.'

I took over the charge in mid-January and I had to meet the target by March-end. I had very little time and so I toured the taluka constantly for 28 days, visiting every village. I took the help of the staff of the health and the revenue departments as well as the panchayat. I was determined to meet the target, and to my surprise, I was able to do so by the end of February. Even today I find it astonishing that what had not been achieved in last ten years, could be done in such a short time. I remember I was rewarded for my work with a cheque of Rs. 2500. I took a loan of Rs. 7500 from the bank and bought a Yashika TV for Rs. 10,000. Thus in 1985, I bought my first TV in Palanpur thanks to the Family Planning Programme.

39. Bavla

Bavla was a large town in Dholka taluka which enjoyed a lot of importance in the taluka because of its paper mill, oil mills, rice mills, and ginning factory. The Patels formed a large portion of the population and they were also the most affluent as they owned most of these mills. The Patels also dominated the town panchayat. Mr. Ishwarbhai Patel was known as the kingmaker in the district. Then there was Mr. Achabhai Patel who was known as Achakaka in the district. He had a large ginning factory in Bavla. He too was a very influential person in the district and had a good rapport with the officers of the revenue department.

Bavla also has a large population of educated dalits. There was a great deal of awareness among the dalits at that time. Many of them had contributed to the development of the dalits. Mr. Govindbhai had participated in the agitation headed by Dr. Ambedkar. Mr. Balvantbhai Parmar became the director of the social welfare department and later the managing director of the Corporation of the Economic Development of the Scheduled Caste.

The dalits protested against the practice of segregation in the place where people came to fill drinking water. The panchayat had provided separate water taps for the dalits and had built a wall to separate the taps providing water to dalits from those that provided water to others. The dalits carried out an agitation against this practice of separatism.

I have spoken earlier of how I had seen dalit women with empty water pots waiting at the taps. As a part of this agitation all the scheduled caste Members of the Legislative Assembly had decided to go on hunger strike at this place. I took up this issue after I came to Bavla. The date for fasting had been decided. I had a long talk with the panchayat's members. Then I sent Mr. Dhulabhai Gohil to Vadodara to talk to Mr. Nagjibhai Arya and managed to get the strike cancelled. After a great deal of effort I was able to break the wall that separated the taps. To celebrate this occasion I arranged a grand function where the chief minister Mr. Hitendrabhai Desai and his cabinet ministers were invited. Because Hitendrabhai was fifty-six at that time, there were fifty-six pairs of bullock, fifty-six young girls carrying water pots, and fifty-six religious music groups to welcome him. Mr. Chhaganbhai Bharvad had worked very hard to make this celebration a success. Dr. Bhanubhai Pandya was then a minister from the Bavla constituency. After the function, he took me aside and congratulated me for resolving this issue. But once the function was over and the chief minister had left, there was stone pelting by the people of the village. I immediately got into action and did not allow the situation to go out of control. After this amicable resolution of water crisis, many leaders of the taluka including Chhaganbhai Bharvad wanted me to stand

in the next legislative election as a scheduled caste candidate from Bavla. But I refused their offer.

There was another very interesting incident that involved the dalits of Bavla. Once, when I was talking to the TDO at the taluka panchayat office, I came to know that some of the members of Bavla Panchayat including Ishwarbhai Patel had handed in their resignations. As a result the Patels were no longer in the majority. I immediately went to Bavla and met Mr. Acharya who was a manager of a cinema hall in the village. He had been keen to become the chairman of the panchayat. He managed to get the majority votes and got elected as the chairman and at the same time Mr. Dhulabhai Gohil, a dalit candidate, became the vice chairman.

After the election results were announced, Mr. Ishwarbhai Patel came to me and said, 'Saheb, we now realize that we shouldn't have resigned.' Then he added hesitantly what could be done to rectify the situation.

I answered, 'I'm afraid it is too late. The administrative body of the panchayat has already been formed and both the chairman and the vice chairman have been elected through the democratic process.'

I could clearly read the disappointment and despair on his face.

For the first time in the history of Bavla a dalit had been elected as the vice chairman of a local administrative body. This was a new awakening for the dalits and it had a long-term positive impact. Dhulabhai Gohil later got elected as a member of the Legislative Assembly and became the chairman of the Gujarat Handloom Development Corporation.

On one occasion Muktajeevandasji Maharaj, the head of the Swaminarayan sect, visited Bavla. As a mamlatdar I too had received an invitation to attend this function. A grand stage had been constructed for the occasion and I sat on the dais along with other dignitaries. I remember flowers had been showered on us from the helicopter. I also had an opportunity to meet Shri Tejendraprasadji of the same sect at a function in Dholka. He was then a young man and I was also a fresh recruit. While sitting next to him on the dais, I had joked, 'Shri Tejandraprasadji is also a direct recruit mahant.'

Once Mane Patil, the collector of Ahmedabad, called me to his office regarding some work. After our meeting he asked me to accompany him somewhere without giving me any further information. I got into his car and the car took us straight to the residence of the Mahant Shri Yogiji Maharaj of the Swaminarayan sect. We were taken immediately to the Mahantshri. He first thumped the collector's back and then my back, which held a great significance for his devotees.

40. Rajoda

Once again I received the news that rubbish had been thrown into the well of the dalits of Rajoda. It was late afternoon and I decided to go there immediately. I did not have an official car at my disposal so I sat pillion on the motorbike of the circle officer Sankalchand Patel. I first went to the dalit moholla. The sarpanch and the police patel turned up as soon as they came to know of my arrival. The residents could not identify the miscreants and hesitated to cast their doubts on anyone, and the sarpanch and the police patel also expressed their helplessness in the matter. Unimpressed, I turned to the sarpanch and said, 'You're the sarpanch so I hold you responsible. Tell me who has done this.'

Both the sarpanch and the police patel tried to hedge. Meanwhile the dalits were excited and the atmosphere in the village was tense. I was aware that any moment a violent conflict could erupt. I went to the panchayat office and then went around the village, making adequate police arrangements so that the dalits would not

be attacked in my absence. All arms were confiscated and some known miscreants were arrested, who were released on bail the next day. I took undertakings from the sarpanch, the police patel and other leaders that no untoward incident would take place in the village after I had left. I was in the village till two at night. When I was finally ready to leave the village and sat on the pillion seat, the sarpanch stopped me and asked me to remain for the rest of the night. I was taken aback and wondered whether he feared trouble after I had left! He added, 'Saheb, it is risky to travel in an open vehicle at this time of the night. There is a Dafer settlement on the way and they are very vicious. They do not hesitate to kill a person even for a small sum. If anything were to happen to you we would be held responsible.'

At first I said that he need not worry, nothing would happen to me. Then I looked at the circle officer. He too seemed a little unsure. The threat of the Dafers could not be ignored or taken lightly. I suddenly recalled a case of another Dafer who had died in a brawl and I had to carry out an inquest. The dead Dafer had looked so frightening that even today I shudder to recall the malice in his eyes. The sarpanch was right. The Dafers would not know that the pillion rider was the mamlatdar and they could attack at anytime. But I decided to leave for Dholka and left the place on Sankalchand's motorbike. On the way the circle officer said, 'Saheb, the way these people have spoken has made me a little suspicious about their intention. They may have hatched some plan and then they could conveniently blame the Dafers. So I have decided to take a different route.'

Then he referred to the risk I had taken at Sahij, adding, 'This fear was there in Sahij too. Saheb, I would request you not to move around alone.'

I remembered Shakrabhai of Sahij village. He too had expressed similar fear at that time on the river bed. So people did discuss such incidents! I returned to Dholka at three and immediately sat down to prepare a detailed report of the event. By the time I finished it was four o' clock in the morning.

Rajoda became an unforgettable part in my life. While I was posted in Dholka many complaints were lodged against

me. As a mamlatdar I had the responsibility of supervising the supply of grains to the fair price shops, oversee relief works and other disaster-related works. I was also in charge of the government godowns. So there was ample scope for lodging complaints against me. The number of complaints that were lodged was so many that often I was not even aware of them. Once I was accused of taking a bribe. An enquiry was carried out but nothing objectionable was found against me. The collector wrote a note on that complaint and sent it back to me: 'After going through the details of the complaint it was found that the entire thing was baseless. If you would like to lodge a case of defamation against the party you are free to do so.'

How many cases of defamation could I lodge? I knew that at every step I would have to face similar accusations. After I took over the charge of this taluka the number of land-related litigation had increased many fold. The land issue in Sahij had acquired a large proportion. Most accusations were baseless but both the local officers and the other officials of the administration were keen to find me at fault. Then suddenly the officers found a case against me. They said that in Rajoda village I had evacuated a lease-holder from his land. They requested the collector to suspend me on the basis of this case.

A Rajput had usurped a piece of land that belonged to a carpenter. During British rule artisans like carpenters, barbers, ironsmiths, and dalits were given land as a gift for rendering services to the village. These lands were known as *pasayata* land. A Rajput claimed to be a tenant of this pasayata land that belonged to the carpenter. According to the Act of Abolition of *Pasayata* Land such gifted lands could not be given on lease. If the holder was not a tiller then the land would belong to the government. The carpenter submitted his claim over the land and lodged a complaint against the Rajput for usurping his land. A senior deputy mamlatdar, Soni, visited the place and after an enquiry he submitted the file to me with his note stating that the Rajput should be asked to vacate the land. The piece of land was very meagre. How much would an artisan get as a gift! Not more than two acres! I gave my approval by signing on the note of Soni. He then went

back to the village and made a panchnama, stating that the land should be taken away from the Rajput and returned to the carpenter. The Rajput did not protest at that time nor did he come to me with any complaint. One day, another deputy mamlatdar from my office, who was a Rajput, said to me, 'Sir, that Soni has taken your signature flouting rules.'

I had forgotten about this case. The Rajput from Rajoda had a brother who was a teacher in a high school in Ahmedabad. He found out a way to reach the revenue minister and then sent in a well-framed complaint to the collector and the minister. In it he requested them to suspend both the mamlatdar and the deputy mamlatdar. The officers who were eagerly awaiting an opportunity to defame me found this to be an opportune moment. Without carrying out any enquiry or asking for any explanation from me, they acted on the suggestion of the applicant and sent in a request application to the collector to suspend me.

Later, researching extensively on this case, I came across a signature of the previous mamlatdar on a similar comment made by an earlier deputy mamlatdar. I found that paper in a file kept in the record room. No action had been taken against the mamlatdar then. But this I found out later. In the present case though the procedure to get back the land from the Rajput had been done on paper, in reality he had not vacated and so the allegation of my forcefully evacuating the Rajput was also false. I had signed on the paper because the law stipulated that a gifted land could not be given on lease and also because I thought that the carpenter should get justice. I had also relied on the fact that a senior deputy mamlatdar had put his comment after reviewing the situation. In fact, if any action had to be taken it would have to be against the deputy mamlatdar. Secondly, if the mamlatdar's order was wrong, as per the rule, an appeal had to be lodged with the collector or the deputy collector against the mamlatdar's action. The case became more and more complex over a period of time with two mamlatdars and two collectors giving two diverse decisions. As I studied the case in depth I got to know many new facts.

The news of my likely suspension spread in the taluka. My opponents were overjoyed. The castes above the dalits in Sahij,

Rajoda, Bhumli, Kharanti, Vataman, Chaloda, Chandisar, and other villages too were ecstatic. The days passed awaiting the suspension order. I knew for certain that the collector had sent my suspension order for approval to the secretariat. Generally, once the collector sends a suspension order for approval, the decision is taken immediately but in this case for some reason the file got stuck at the lower level. As a result, I benefited because soon the collector was transferred, and in September 1973 I was also transferred. Finally, instead of suspending me, a departmental enquiry was carried out and they stopped three increments. I then appealed against this verdict and as a result instead of three I lost only one increment and that too without any future repercussions. So I did not incur much financial loss but its impact on my personal and social life was long and deep. It took eight years to resolve this case. Because there is a great scope for corruption in the job of a mamlatdar, nobody would believe that I could have abstained from taking bribes. I went through a great deal of stress. This decision had a long-term impact on my promotion. I became deputy collector at a very late stage in my career while many of my juniors were promoted much earlier. I also lost in the seniority status. My promotion to the post of the additional collector was also delayed.

In my childhood I had been beaten up often because I was an untouchable. The physical wounds like the blow on my hand healed over a period of time. However severe these blows might have been, they could be treated, but for the deep wound inflicted on one's heart there is no medicine except death! When I remember the incidents like the one I have described, I shed tears of blood and every pore of my body burns in a fierce fire! The laws of the judiciary are based on the tenet that though a hundred guilty may escape punishment, no innocent should be victimized. In the introduction of my book *Shool* I have inverted an old saying. Instead of saying 'though the snakes have disappeared but their traces remain', I have stated 'the traces have been erased but the snakes remain'. But then, all through my life I have been encircled by snakes. Wherever I went and whichever house I lived in, I always encountered snakes. I had to deal with snakes not just in my house but outside as well.

The tenet cited also applied to me in inverse order–though 100 innocents may escape punishment, even one guilty present must not escape! The chief minister and his ministers often state in their speeches, 'if an officer has committed ten errors in good faith and with right intention he will be pardoned, but if one mistake is committed intentionally then he will not be spared.' How lofty these words sound! But the reality is so different. In my thirty years of service I had to face just this departmental enquiry and that too for a very insignificant issue. My punishment too was very mild and yet what a frightening proportion it acquired! A suspension order! At first glance it would seem that I must have committed a horrendous crime! What had I done? Embezzled crores of rupees from the government funds? Raped a woman or murdered somebody? Even if I had murdered somebody, the case would not have taken such a long time to resolve. Yet how many years I had to pass in acute mental agony!

41. Meghruj

From Dholka I was transferred to Meghruj in Sabarkantha district. Around this time the government was seriously trying to improve the plight of the tenant farmers. The land reform law had been enforced in the country. A team of loyal and committed officers had been formed to look into the cases of the tenant farmers. I was selected to be a member of this team and was made the tenancy mamlatdar. I had been transferred to Meghruj to look after the interest of the tenant farmers. Look at the cruelty or crookedness of the administration! I was asked to look after the welfare of the tenant farmers when there was an accusation against me of having ousted a so-called tenant farmer and an appeal for my suspension. It is indeed rare to come across such a mind-set!

In Meghruj, too, it was difficult for me to find any accommodation. I had thought that as Meghruj was a tribal area finding a place would not pose a problem. But the majority of the residents of this village were non-tribal; they were from the higher castes and so the practice of untouchability was rampant. The person who was posted after me was a Patel and so had no trouble finding accommodation. In the beginning I stayed in the resthouse but it was not possible to do so for a longer duration. I started looking for a suitable house. The circle officer and the deputy mamlatdar too joined me in the search but it was impossible to get a house in the village.

I did not bring my family to Meghruj. They had stayed back in Dholka. I had a three-year-old daughter and my wife was expecting another child. Just two months after I reported for work at Meghruj, in November, our second daughter was born. Now I was desperate to bring my family here. My search for a house continued. Finally when nothing worked out, I decided to rent a shop and brought my family to live there. The shop was a two-storey building and it was situated on the road. I had to pay a higher rent, almost double, because it was commercial property. Moreover, it also lacked the regular amenities of a house—water had to be fetched from outside and there was no latrine. So we had to carry a latrine tin and walk to the banks of the Vatrak in the forested area. As an officer it disturbed me to do this but there was no option. I had to go very early in the morning when it was still dark. For sometime I used the resthouse latrine but the watchman was not happy about it because he had to remain present. Finally, he complained to his superior who in turn wrote to the collector. The collector wrote to me asking me not to use the latrine. I had repeatedly requested the collector for a transfer in the light of not finding suitable accommodation but he had never bothered to answer any of my letters. However, when this watchman complained, he replied promptly. He was quick to point out that I should not use the toilet in the resthouse.

Since I was residing in commercial premises there was a constant traffic of people. They sat on our veranda and smoked beedies, gossiped and abused each other in foul language. This would have been an ideal residence for a government officer who wanted to use

the position for his own profit. I only wanted a proper 'home' for my family. Often when I went out of town on official tours my family had to spend sleepless nights under the shadow of fear. Finally, exasperated by the constant harassment of the people, I vacated this shop, and as in Dholka, found a house owned by a Muslim, near the foothills. And though it was away from the habitation, it at least had the semblance of a home. My request to the collector for a transfer continued but I received no response.

I had to visit the tribal villages to examine tenancy cases. If there were a large number of cases in any village, I would stay back that night and return the next day. I investigated the cases and gave out the verdict the same day. The target set for a tenancy mamlatdar was generally a hundred cases per month, but I usually managed to resolve around hundred and fifty. I remember one month I had resolved around hundred and sixty. Sometimes the number of cases resolved by me was more than the total number of cases resolved by all the tenancy mamlatdars of the district, and more than the total cases of the district. But the administration applied the same parameters to judge the performance of both the ones who completed only about fifteen cases per month and somebody like me who completed more than hundred cases per month. Once the land reform director, Mr. Raval, from the secretariat in the capital, Gandhinagar, came down to Himmatnagar and called a meeting of all the tenancy mamlatdars and reviewed their completed cases. He told all of them in the meeting, 'Why don't you ask Jadav how he is able to resolve so many cases?'

Nobody said a word. He then turned to me and said, 'Jadav, why don't you teach them?'

I used to follow a different method than the others. I would carry out an enquiry and give out a written judgment the same day. Delay is the root cause of corruption and I detest any kind of delay. Today there is nobody to question why so few cases are settled and nor is there any deterrent for causing a delay in the settlement. Everybody is happy to get his or her salary on the first of the month. Once people occupy the seat of power, they behave as if they are royalty! There is a feeling of complacency all around. How many cases remain pending in the courts today! The common man for whom this entire administrative structure has been built

has been totally forgotten. Does anybody ever get to see this marginalized person on the TV screen!

After Raval's departure, the collector of Himmatnagar, Mr. S. N. Shukla, called me to his residence. After discussing the administrative issues of the collector's office, he said, 'Jadav, why don't you come to my office? At present I'll appoint you as the additional chitnis and after sometime you'll be made the mamlatdar in one of the talukas.'

The collector then had the power to carry out internal transfers in the district. But the former collector, Chandubhai Patel, in spite of my repeated appeal for a transfer especially in the light of the difficulty in finding suitable accommodation, had taken no action. And he was always dressed in khadi clothes and talked of Gandhian ideals! I have come across many with such double standards in the administration. Like the proverbial elephant, they had two sets of teeth—one to chew with and the other to show. Mr. Shukla on the other hand not only issued my transfer order the very day I met him at his residence, but also telephoned me at Meghruj to find out whether I had received it! He was apprehensive of any delay caused by the office in sending the order! This I came to know when I reported at Himmatnagar and when he explained why he had telephoned me.

The land reform director who succeeded Mr. Raval also wanted a loyal and committed officer in his office. Mr. R. K. Shah who later became the secretary to the chief minister had suggested my name to him. I was called to Gandhinagar and I met the director and the deputy director. I spent an entire day there, but I could guess that I was not going to be given the post. I was denied the post because of my caste.

I wanted to visit a village called Mandli which was earlier in Meghruj taluka but now it is in the neighbouring state of Rajasthan. Mandli has been made famous by the renowned writer Pannalal Patel who has been a great influence in my literary development and I have gained a great deal from him. I had read his novels when I was in the eighth standard and even at that time his use of dialect had a great impact on me. When I was in the tenth standard, as I have talked of earlier, I wrote my first short story '*Rati Rayan ni Ratash*', using the rural dialect, and as readers will recall, it was

awarded the first prize in the school and was published in *Chandni* in June 1959 and had evoked a debate which had lasted for six months. Finally, Ashokbhai Harsha had to devote an entire issue of *Chandarvo* to it. The use of dialect earned me the epithet of 'Junior Pannalal' in school.

So one day I reached Pannalal's village to meet Kano and Jeevi of *Malela Jeev*. I went around the village and observed the houses, hovels, cattlesheds, charpoys. But I did not come across any Kano, Jeevi or Gangli Ghachan. I remembered to have read somewhere that when Pannalal had brought out *Malela Jeev* the famous poet Nanalal had commented, 'How can there be any literature of the *ghayjas*—the barbers. Throw the book in the water-heating stove.'

If Pannalal's works had evoked such a comment, how could dalit literature find any place in literature? Today both Nanalal and Pannalal have mingled in the earth. Only Kano and Jeevi are immortal, and though I could not find them in the village, the bitter hunger depicted in *Manvi ni Bhavai* still had the village in its grip! At a literary gathering in Idar I had said that the reality was worse than what Pannalal Patel had depicted. It was ironical that hunger made the upper castes seize the meat of dead cattle that the dalits were cooking and run away with it, even eating the mud-smeared pieces that had fallen on the ground while they fled.

Pannalal had no first hand experience of dalit society. If he had been exposed to their plight he would have certainly written about it in *Manvi ni Bhavai*. Perhaps, he was aware of it but the fear of the upper castes' wrath prevented him from penning it. Or was it the fear of Nanalal? A tremendous amount of courage is needed to create dalit literature. The agony of bitter hunger experienced during famine pales before the pain that a dalit has to bear when the stamp of an untouchable is branded on every pore of his body.

Once in the context of a case, a tall and big built landowner came to my office. After discussing for some time he requested me to settle the case in his favour. He looked at me steadily, waiting for a response. Then he lifted his kurta and from an inner pocket of his vest took out a bundle of hundred rupee notes and placed it on my table. I was taken aback. I was furious and immediately rose to go to the police station which was right opposite my office. When I came out of my chamber the landowner picked up his

bundle and ran. I then called the deputy mamlatdar. He was a Rajput and a resident of Meghruj. I thought that he was in league with this man and so I asked him about the landlord and narrated the incident. But he denied any knowledge about him. Then I called the circle inspector. He too denied having any information about the person. The circle inspector was a brahmin and I remember whenever I toured the taluka, he would accompany me. He used to cook his food and would not partake any other food. He always first served me and then ate. The deputy mamlatdar drank and so I never took him on any tour. Once he had even come to office in a drunken state. I had reprimanded him and had threatened that if he repeated this behaviour I would hand him over to the police. After this incident, he was scared of me and never came drunk to the office. After I left Meghraj I came to know of a strange and sad incident. A police sub inspector of Meghruj died after consuming liquor and pigeon meat. I also came to know of incidents of certain officers exploiting the women of these backward tribal areas.

The tribal people would go to bed hungry but would not beg. There is a deep sense of pride in this community. They have to leave their home and hearth unattended and migrate for satiating hunger. Their wandering life has not ended even today.

The Vatrak River–the backbone of Meghruj–flowed just behind my house. I would often spend time on its bank with my family. We would carry some chickpea and puffed rice to feed the fish in the river and sitting in the lap of nature I would forget the wounds of life for a while. To visit some of the villages we had to cross the Vatrak which was not very broad or deep at that place. Jeeps and buses also crossed the river in summer when water level was very low. Both sides were at a gradient and so when jeeps or buses ascended the slope it appeared as if an aircraft was taking off to the sky! I had a chance to visit an ashram at Kasana. I also went to Mr. Narsinhbhai's ashram for the tribal children. The whole taluka was a densely forested area. At a village in this taluka, I remember there were two pipal trees on both sides of the road. Their shapes were so similar that they seemed to be twins–a reflection of one another! Inspired by these trees I had written a short story

called 'Laughing Pipal' which was published in a monthly called *Arsi*. Here in Meghruj taluka I saw many spectacular creations of nature—a series of three trees which had grown from one to another to a third one, three kinds of pipals with white, red, and green trunks. The wood of the red pipal is used to light the holy fire. This pipal grows with its trunk forking into two branches and the place of its division resembles a female genital. In Sanskrit the trunk of a pipal has been compared to the thighs of a woman and its surface is very smooth to touch. I had seen a similar pipal in an ashram in Modasa. In the folksong '*Shamlaji ne mele ranajhaltu pijhantu wage, jhanjharivali nelma ranjhantu re pinjhantu wage*'[1] the '*jhanjharivali nel*' (tinkling narrow path) is mentioned. I have walked through this tinkling narrow path to reach the Meshwo Dam. This narrow path was so densely wooded that it was eerie to walk even at mid-day. Once walking down this path I was petrified—afraid of coming across such wild animals like pythons, cobras, cheetahs or tigers. I wonder how dense the vegetation would have been when this song had been written! In Devni Mori village which was submerged when the Meshwa Dam was built, a statue of Lord Buddha and other relics were found. I had also seen orange and green coloured earth there. In a true sense this was 'green earth'. How rich was the natural heritage of these tribal people! Their literature too boasted of a *Ramayan* called *Bhill's Ramayan*. I often wondered did Lord Buddha visit this place because he wanted to rescue these people from the grip of blind faith and belief in numerous Gods and Goddesses?

Along with Meghruj I was also given the responsibility of Malpur taluka. All the other tenancy mamlatdars in the district had only one taluka under them, whereas I was given the responsibility of two backward talukas. In Malpur, both the mamlatdar and the taluka development officer belonged to the scheduled caste, and both tried to hide their identity. One of them, afraid of being recognized, even delayed meeting me. To whom do I speak of this

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1. An old folk song which describes the journey of a cart on its way to the fair at Shamlaji in Sabarkantha district. The song catches the tinkling sound of the cart as it passes through the narrow forested path.

agony? I have undergone so many different kinds of heartrending experiences in these two talukas. I have also come in touch with the tribal population of Malpur.

While I was in Meghruj, communal riots broke out in Gujarat and its effect was felt in this taluka too, where it had spread from Modasa. For the first time curfew had to be enforced in Meghruj; an altogether new experience for its people who ran about calling out loudly, 'Curfew is coming.'

42. Himmatnagar

I was transferred to Himmatnagar. I moved into government quarters that were opposite the sub jail, and I considered myself to be fortunate. I had the responsibility of arranging all the district-level meetings. This post was not considered a very prestigious one in the collector's office, but because I was able to do it well, holding meetings that were significant, I managed to add to its significance. All the officers who came to attend meetings always came to my room and as a result of this exposure I learnt a great deal about different departments.

As earlier stated, in Chapter 27, I had received the housing allotment file of three vacant houses and had allotted these to the dalit employees. The government order of 1967 had not been implemented by 1975 when I left.

During my posting in Himmatnagar, the prime minister, Indira Gandhi, paid a visit. The district collector, Mr. Shukla, gave me the responsibility of setting up the stage from where the prime minister would address the public. Generally, such responsibilities are given only to trusted officers, and it gave me an opportunity to be near the prime minister. Mr. Shukla was succeeded by Mr. Mistry, and then by

Mr. K. K. Kak. The latter too had great faith in my ability and he issued an official order, taking away the establishment of the entire district from the chitnis branch, giving it to me instead—an unprecedented action in the Gujarat government. After discussing with the collector I transferred many of the dalit employees who had been posted unwillingly in the tribal areas to the postings in the urban areas. I took a keen interest in the promotion and transfer of the dalit and tribal employees. I also transferred some of the employees who had grabbed coveted postings and had managed to remain there for a long time. It was natural that the employees union was not happy about my style of work. Some of the leaders of the union were also affected by my decisions. There was a union of the scheduled caste employees but it was almost defunct. My work had increased manifold—every day I carried home a big pile of files.

Then Kak issued another order. He instructed that all the cases of the magisterial and the accounts sections of the district be sent through me. As a rule, the files of all the branches go directly to the resident deputy collector (RDC) but after this order was issued many started addressing me as additional RDC. In Gujarat only the collector of Sabarkantha district had issued such an order. My workload was very heavy—I worked on the files till three in the morning. I never left any file pending and this had direct impact on the employees. During my tenure I had taken up the work of settlement of many of the old pending cases. No proper record of files was maintained and so it was very difficult to locate an old file. For three months I undertook a large scale operation of arrangement of old files. Everyone who worked in the collector's office was responsible for this neglect. The record room was in the cellar of a palace in Himmatnagar. A huge cobra also inhabited the cellar. Some employees claimed that they had seen the snake many times, though I never did. Nobody wanted to visit the record room and if they had to, they went in a group of two or three. In the pretext of arranging the record room I made them open all the bundles and then arranged the files year-wise, and a thick layer of dust that had accumulated for years was cleaned up. The local newspapers at that time often reported about the improvement in record keeping. So many files could be located and it was possible to settle old pending cases.

A training programme on surveying was arranged at Himmatnagar. Along with other officers I also enrolled in this programme. There was an examination at the end of the training programme. It was a state-level examination but when the result was declared I did not find my name in the list of the candidates who had cleared the test. The other officers were as surprised as I was at my results. I thought I could miss the first rank or not secure a first class, but I was sure that I could not fail. The candidate who secured the first rank was from Himmatnagar and I was well aware of his calibre. I realized that there was something irregular in the whole thing. I immediately wrote to the settlement commissioner and when he looked into the matter my doubt proved to be correct. A fresh result was put up in which I was declared first in the state. They informed me that there had been a clerical error. Government offices abound in such euphemisms like technical error, clerical error, press mistake, paper mistake, mishandling, and so on, to cover up their faults. I was told that though my name was on the top of the list, the typist had not typed it in the final list. I was not willing to accept this excuse because the person who came after me would carry the number two against his name. Moreover, after the names have been typed it would be tallied against the original list. It is possible to make an error in one of the names appearing somewhere in the middle of the list but definitely not with the top names. This was deliberately planned to deprive a dalit officer of his rightful position. Such actions or 'mistakes' are never examined. Indeed the perpetrators of such acts are protected by many of their eager 'godfathers'. These godfathers would not allow anyone to cause even the slightest harm to their protégés. If, on the other hand, a dalit employee had committed such an error he would have been subjected to severe punishment! I passed each year of my service in such a deprived and sad condition.

I remember once I had visited Bhagwatiprasad who was a *Gayatri* worshipper. Earlier he had been a priest and then he took up the chanting of Gayatri mantra. I had visited him along with the civil judge Desai, deputy collector Trivedi and superintendent of the forest department, Dave. When we reached his house, at Sardoy, all except me were allowed to enter his inner room. My dalit identity came in the way. I was furious but I could not do anything on

private premises. At every step in life I was made aware of being a dalit. I had cited this incident in my speech given on the occasion of the release of my novel *Shool* at Nadiad's Santram Mandi, which was later published in a journal called *Naya Marg*. From this article the paragraph describing this incident was lifted and printed on the last cover page of *Swastha Manav*. It aroused a heated discussion which the journal carried out at length. A reader even accused the editor, Chinubhai, of publishing it on the cover page because he was a Jain and not a Hindu. I was totally unaware of this controversy over my statement because I had not seen the journal and nor did I know its editor. I came to know about it only when the editor of *Naya Marg*, Indubhai Jani, sent me a copy of the said journal. *Swastha Manav* is a serious thought-provoking journal which usually does not publish stories but when I later sent in some of my essays and stories it had published them. In the introduction to *Rati Rayan ni Ratash* I have written about it.

I had a similar experience in Idar Fort when I had visited the place with Trivedi, Dave and other officers. We were told that an enlightened person called Bhurababa had an ashram there. He was called Bhura (blue) Baba because his complexion was blue. There were many tales about his age—some claimed he was three hundred years old whereas others said he was five hundred years. However, when we reached the place we were told that Bhurababa was not present but somebody called Munibaba now resided there.We decided to meet him. I was greatly disappointed when we talked to him. I could perceive that though he resided on this lofty hill, his ideas were absolutely pedestrian. Karsandas Soneri who belonged to the scheduled caste had just been appointed a minister in the state government and he had won his seat from Idar. Talking about him Munibaba commented, 'What does he know about administration? What can he achieve as a minister?'

I was stunned. I understood that he was only giving voice to the age-old prejudice that he had inherited. All attempts to achieve spirituality through meditation and endeavour do not always help to overcome the inherent weaknesses within a person. Most people hanker either for wealth or for fame. In my novel *Mool ane Dhool* I have exposed these kinds of pseudo godmen. When I was posted in Raj Bhavan, a renowned holy man had once said, 'Why don't

you persuade the governor to visit my ashram?'

I knew what he really wanted. I have always felt that poisonous creatures were less dangerous than a venomous man. My house in Himmatnagar was located behind the temple of Harsiddhama. Whenever the holy fire was lit my house would be full of smoke as if the fire had been lit in my house! There was a narrow path of about five feet between the temple and the compound wall of my house where occasionally snakes were seen. My house had a wooden ceiling covered with tiles. The gap between the ceiling and the tiles was so wide that a person could easily move around in a crouching position. At the ceiling level there was a window which always remained open. Very often we heard a rustling sound from the ceiling as if a snake was moving around. We never worried about it. Once, Shardaben, the wife of the local mamlatdar, visited us. She lived in the same row in the third house. While she and Bharti were talking that rustling sound was heard. Terrified, Shardaben cried, 'This is the hissing of a cobra. I remember having heard it on a farm. Yes, it is certainly the hissing of a snake.'

She was very scared but we laughed and I said, 'We often hear this sound.'

She replied that it was very dangerous and we must search the ceiling. After this, Bharti too got scared. She insisted that I should check the ceiling. I answered her laughing, 'Well, just imagine! The snake god is up there and we are down below!'

Then I explained that if she looked at the ceiling she would see that there was no space for the snake to enter and she should keep the back door shut. Bharti was afraid because of our two daughters. But we continued to live in that house for three more years and I was never worried about the snake. Truly, I was more frightened of a human snake than a cobra. A cobra carries its poison only in its mouth, whereas every pore of a man's body is filled with poison!

Around this time it was decided to carry out surprise checking of the cinema halls every month to ensure that the cinema halls were paying the entertainment tax. There were complaints against some halls that their owners showed movies without issuing tickets to the audience to evade this tax. Sometimes the usher or the issuing clerk favoured his friends and relatives in this manner. As a result the government was deprived of the revenue. These checks

were done without prior notice to even the officers or the employees of the raiding group. They would be informed just before the checking about the place where they had to go. The information was given in sealed envelopes. At times they were given these envelopes at ten at night so that the checking could be carried out for the late night show.

During one of these surprise checks, I caught five government employees watching a movie without tickets. I saw that they could be suspended from their jobs. I discussed the matter with the collector. Among these five, one was a dalit who had come under the influence of the others. They were all clerical staff. I realized that suspension was too harsh a punishment when it was so difficult to find a job. It would also mean great hardship for their families. So they were let off after charging them the tax amount and with a warning. There was quite a scare in the district about these checks. Whenever I wanted to watch a movie I would send my peon to buy tickets without the knowledge of the cinema hall owner. It also worked as a check on the cinema halls. I followed this practice when I was posted in Dholka and Sabarkantha districts. I had to be very careful of my conduct in the light of the fact that the suspension proposal had been sent to the government when I was in Dholka.

My father died when I was posted in Himmatnagar. During his illness I had taken a fortnight's leave and come down to Kalol. Pitaji had a premonition about his death. He would often tell me, 'Bhai, I can see somebody in a black dress' whereas there was nobody around. His long habit of smoking made him gesture the action of smoking a beedi. He was confined to bed and Ma nursed him all the time. Sometimes he would soil his bed but Ma would not allow me to clean him up. Only once when she had gone out I cleaned him up. I had only one day left of my leave when Pitaji called me and said, 'Bhai, you have served me like the legendary Shravan. I'll be fine, nothing will happen to me. You go back to your job.' Ma too said, 'Don't worry about us Bhai. We'll call you if the need arises. Don't waste your leave.' My younger brother Kanti was with them so I came back to Himmatnagar. Next day I received the telegram stating Pitaji had died. I went back immediately. Ma told me sobbing, 'Bhai, while you were here you

did not allow your Pitaji to go. The minute you left he left us. He was content.'

I spent about a year in Meghruj and about three years in Himmatnagar in Sabarkantha district. Transfer is an inevitable part of a government job, and so once again I was transferred, this time to Sardarnagar Township in Ahmedabad. I was made the recovery officer in the municipality. I remember at a farewell function I had said, 'I did not come here of my own free will and neither am I leaving on my own accord. Transfer has brought me here and transfer will take me away once more.'

43. Sardarnagar

I went for a year on deputation to Sardarnagar Township. Just as in Sabarkantha district I had come in close contact with the tribal population, here I got acquainted with the Sindhis. The people of this community too carry a deep wound in their hearts. At the time of the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, Sindhis who had migrated to India, leaving behind their homes, land and wealth, were rehabilitated in this township. A separate township named after Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was established for them which came to be called Sardarnagar Township. Like dalits, Sindhis too had to flee from their land. The only difference is dalits flee to escape the atrocities of the powerful fellow residents of their villages whereas the Sindhis had to flee from their land to escape atrocities of the fellow residents who had become religious bigots after Partition.

In Sabarkantha district I had observed that a tribal would go hungry but never beg. The same quality I found in the Sindhi community. The Sindhi male would try to eke out a living, taking up any job he could lay his hand on. He did not hesitate even to sell peanuts in trains. Carrying the basket of peanuts he would hop from one compartment to another. This community had internalized the lessons of self respect and hard work. This was a new experience for me. Generally, officers try to avoid this kind of posting but for me it was an opportunity to get acquainted with a strong and proud community. I rented a house in the settlement and so I got to learn their social and religious practices. I found that the women too worked hard at home. Many of them took up tailoring and in fact they now meet the demand of sari-petticoats of the entire Ahmedabad city. At Kubernagar too, another rehabilitation centre, there are many home industries where women make candles, joss sticks, and so on. At Sardarnagar as the recovery officer, I was responsible for the collection of municipal tax. The job of a tax collector is always very difficult and yet I carried out this task with great commitment and succeeded in collecting more revenue than earlier years'. I also had to visit Kubernagar for tax collection. The rich and upper caste Sindhis from Pakistan reside in the beautiful Sardarnagar Township whereas dalits, poor and backward classes generally live in Kubernagar. Whenever I visited the dalit moholla, I used to ask the residents why they left Pakistan. I was curious to know which strong aspect of life brought them to this country. In Pakistan they could have led an easy life devoid of the curse of untouchability. Then why did they migrate? I'm often baffled by this question. Sometimes I met Mr. Fakirbhai Vaghela in the township, especially during the municipal elections. At a later stage he became a minister in the state government. Once there was a discourse of Shri Asharam Bapu in Sardarnagar and I was invited as the chief guest. I remember sitting on the dais with him.

Near Kubernagar there is a place called Chharanagar where I came across a unique culture. I often had clashes with many anti-social elements there. Whenever I visited the houses to collect tax and asked for the male member, I would be told 'he is in the prison'. Then I would collect the tax from the person's wife. In certain cases when some bullies refused to pay the tax,

I stopped water supply to their houses. A Sikh plumber accompanied me in these visits, and sometimes he would be scared and refuse to obey my orders and I had to scold him publicly. The chairman of the municipality would ask me to take police protection but I never took any policeman with me. The bullies would come to the corporation office and complain to the chairman, but after sometime they would come back and pay the tax.

I also went to the dalit moholla of Kubernagar. They paid the tax money immediately out of fear. This way I succeeded in increasing the coffers of the municipality.

After the stipulated one year was over, I was transferred to Viramgam as the tenancy mamlatdar. My stay in Viramgam was short. When the Himmatnagar collector, Mr. Kak, was posted as the secretary to the governor, he asked me to join the staff of Raj Bhavan as the assistant comptroller of the household.

44. Gandhinagar

Mr. K. K. Kak was posted as the secretary to the governor of Gujarat. After resuming his duty he started to find out where I was. He knew that I was posted somewhere in Ahmedabad district and so he rang up Prajapati, PA to the district collector of Ahmedabad, asking about my whereabouts. The latter telephoned me at Viramgam and told me to meet Mr. Kak. The following Sunday we met at Gandhinagar, and he wanted to know whether I was willing to join as the assistant comptroller of household to the governor. When I expressed my willingness, he wrote to the administration for my transfer and in February 1979 I resumed my duty at Raj Bhavan.

For the first time I realized that good work pays. As I have mentioned in Chapter 43, when Kak was the collector of Himmatnagar, he had transferred the work of the entire establishment, except those related to land, from the chitnis branch to me. I had worked hard to live up to his expectation and succeeded in my task. When I reported at the Raj Bhavan I was a Class II officer but over the next month in March when I was promoted to the position of deputy collector he upgraded my post to Class I category and did not allow me to leave Raj Bhavan.

As a reward of my good work and at the request of Kak, when S. K. Shelat was the managing director of Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation, he wrote an official letter to the administration recommending me for the post of land recovery officer. Later, when Kiritbhai Shelat became the managing director of the Rural Development Corporation, he wrote a letter to the secretary, revenue department, recommending my name for the post

of general manager, Rural Development Corporation. I was not aware of this till Shelat came to the Raj Bhavan for the swearing in ceremony of the High Court judges and he took me aside after the ceremony, and said, 'Jadav, when I came to know that your term at Raj Bhavan is coming to an end, I requested the revenue secretary to put you under me in the Rural Development Corporation. If you are interested in the post then put in some effort.'

I had never worked under Shelat, and yet he took the effort to find out about my capability and wrote to the government. Varsani was the municipal commissioner at Vadodara. He, too, without my knowledge, had suggested my name for the post of deputy commissioner. When I was the district planning officer in Palanpur, Jagadisan had been appointed the municipal commissioner of Rajkot. He was very keen that I should join the corporation on special pay but I had declined this offer. When I was the deputy development commissioner, the commissioner of the Cottage Industry wanted me as the joint commissioner in his office. He wrote a letter to this effect to the administration and managed to take me there. This kind of appreciation of my work by the IAS officers has always been a matter of pride and delight for me.

I was the first dalit officer to be appointed at Raj Bhavan, and my appointment was really an exception to the general rule; I had earned it through my good work. During my tenure there I had requested the appointment of another dalit officer in the post of section officer and Ambubhai Trivedi was given the post. While I was there I had also put in a request for Parmar to be transferred from the secretariat to my office in the post of the accountant and that too was granted. Before this no dalit officer/employee had ever been deputed or posted in Raj Bhavan.

Before I took over my charge there was an 'at home party' at Raj Bhavan on 26 January where the total expenditure had been Rs.15, 000. The next year I was in charge I managed to bring down the expenditure to Rs.6000. When the file from the general administration department reached the chief secretary, Mr. H. K. L Kapur, he saw the expense amount of the party and was very impressed. He asked the deputy secretary Mr. D. A. Antani to congratulate me, and the latter rang me up and did so.

I managed to cut down many expenses at Raj Bhavan. In the second year I spent only Rs.5000 for the at home party and in the third year less than Rs. 5000. Both the governor and her secretary were astonished by this drastic reduction. Her secretary had asked me, 'Why don't you check again? Hope you haven't forgotten to include any bills.'

But I had not overlooked any bills. Whenever a party had to be organized the governor would choose the menu but I had to manage the arrangements. I took the help of all the staff. I would arrange some of the dishes which were earlier ordered from outside caterers to be made in the Raj Bhavan kitchen, and this worked out to be economical. It was a very simple step but it called for ingenuity on the part of the officer in charge.

I was also in charge of the garden. During my tenure I spent very little on buying plants. I procured most of the plants from different places. I brought a kevra sapling from the Bharuch Rest House, and then asked the gardeners to use the grafting method to multiply it. The garden boasted a wide range of crotons and ixoras. Raj Bhavan had a kadamb tree, very dear to Lord Krishna, and so I also decided to plant a sapling of Krishna Vad–a dark banyan. Its leaves are large enough to hold a dollop of butter so dear to the Lord. Then there were many exotic creepers–one which had a garlicky smell and another one which had the fragrance of cardamom. At the back I planted colcocia and turmeric plants. The colcocia plants have very decorative leaves and turmeric flowers look very pretty and last a long time. I would ask the gardener to make flower arrangements with these leaves and flowers. Every day fresh flowers were arranged in the vases and kept on all the officers' tables. Once I had brought some wild dry flowers and leaves which Her Excellency Mrs. Sharda Mukerjee had much appreciated and had them put at the entrance of her office. These dry flowers lasted for three to four months and attracted everybody's attention. I enjoyed experimenting with different ideas. Though all such activities were outside the range of my education and training, my keen desire to handle any situation helped me.

Mrs. Sharda Mukerjee wanted to have the 'at home party' on the lawns of old Raj Bhavan in Ahmedabad on the river bank. I accompanied her to survey the lawn and found that the grass had

completely dried up. She asked me, 'Do you think it is possible to make this place green and have plenty of flowers?' I told her that I thought it could be done. When she pointed out that the place had dried up completely, I said that I would nevertheless get it done. I continuously watered the lawn and new green shoots of grass came up and the place looked green. Then I made the gardeners dig up small pits surrounding the lawn and placed in them potted flower plants and covered the base with earth. Only the stems bearing flowers were visible. Mrs. Mukerjee was astonished to see a green lawn dotted with colourful flowers. I'm sure the visitors must have also been impressed with the maintenance of the garden.

On every New Year's Day when ministers, officers and other important citizens visited the governor I used to get a special arrangement of flowers made for the occasion. Once Ambubhai Trivedi told me that the wife of his nephew Suresh drew beautiful rangolis, and I got Suresh' wife, Chandraben, to draw a beautiful rangoli on the following New Year's Day. Mrs. Mukerjee appreciated it a great deal and I introduced Chandraben to her. This rangoli won so much praise that the local edition of *Indian Express* carried a photograph of it. Chandraben went on to become a Member of the Legislature and at present she is known as a writer. Her story '*Chani Bore*' was awarded the first prize with a cash award of Rs. 5000.

I was also given the charge of transportation at Raj Bhavan. Here too I was successful in cutting cost by working out the average mileage given by each vehicle and then saving on petrol.

In those days we often saw snakes which came from the nearby ravines. They were frequently found under the nagchampa tree. Once I remember the gardener came running to me but when I went there I could not find it. The flowers of the nagchampa exude a heady aroma; a single flower is enough to fill a room with its fragrance. Once when the gardener came to my office with a bunch of three flowers, their fragrance immediately permeated the air. The gardener cautioned me, 'Saheb, don't take home any of these flowers.' When I asked him why, he said, 'The fragrance of nagchampa attracts cobras.' I laughed and told him, 'If a cobra is going to pay me a visit I'll take it home right away.' I brought the flowers home in the evening and my house was filled with their

heady fragrance but there was no sign of a cobra. Next day I reported it to the gardener.

But snakes did roam around the Raj Bhavan premises. Perhaps they were attracted by the greenery. I had often seen them in the backyard of my house in Sector 19. My neighbour Tolia was an officer in the forest department and he used to keep a few snakes in a cage in his compound. His son knew how to catch snakes and I had asked him to teach the trick to Ramji, the driver at Raj Bhavan. He learnt the trick and caught a cobra and we let it off in a distant place. After this he often demonstrated his skill by holding a snake's head firmly with one hand while with the other hand held the tail.

When I moved from Sector 19 to the Raj Bhavan premises I once saw a snake on my window pane. It was trying to find an entrance. After some time I saw it in my backyard. I called Ramji immediately but when he tried to catch it, it hid in the crevice between the tiles of the veranda. He tried his best to pull it out with its tail that was still visible but he did not succeed in pulling it out. We removed the tiles but he could not find the snake. Once when I visited Gir Foundation Park near Indroda village, one of the employees picked up a huge python and encircled it around my neck and said, 'Saheb, it doesn't sting.' I had felt something smooth and cold touching my neck. I wondered if Lord Shiva had encircled a snake around his neck to lessen the heat of the poison that he had consumed when it had been thrown out in the churning of the ocean. It was a strange feeling when the python encircled my neck.

My duties also included looking after the dignitaries who visited Raj Bhavan. During my tenure, the prime minister, the president, the vice president, the president of the World Bank and many members of the central government had stayed at Raj Bhavan. I was in charge of arranging lunch and dinner parties for these dignitaries. Besides these parties, as mentioned earlier, there were 'at home' parties on 15 August and 26 January every year and a big luncheon for the entire staff on Diwali. I acquired catering lessons managing such events. Once Mrs. Mukerjee decided to serve a cold lunch and she asked me to supervise the vegetarian and non-vegetarian cold dishes that were going to be served. The

lunch was prepared and kept ready in the refrigerator. It was in mid-summer with scorching heat all around. So when the guests were served the cold lunch they were very delighted. It was a unique experience for them. I was only a revenue officer there but I had to undertake such tasks as well. I had to constantly keep track of the food habits of the guests. Whenever Indira Gandhi visited Raj Bhavan, she made it a point to meet the entire household staff. I remember once prime minister Rajeev Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi came to Raj Bhavan. Mrs. Gandhi recalled the Gujarati karhi that had been served to her at the Surendanagar Cicuit House. I immediately sent for the cook and served her the karhi. When the World Bank president visited Ahmedabad he had liked a piece of beautiful embroidery. I arranged it to be sent to him in Delhi. Aside from these tasks, I also had to oversee the decor of the establishment.

The place was like a small kingdom with all the intrigues found in a royal palace. Once, a sweeper woman was appointed as a personal maid to Mrs. Mukerjee. This irked some of the staff members. How could a sweeper woman enter the governor's bedroom! They waged a battle to remove her from that post. Finally they stooped down to slander her character. A driver claimed that he had an adulterous relationship with her. The news reached Mrs. Mukerjee and the woman was removed from her position. This kind of jealousy was rampant among the staff.

Around this time riots on the issue of reservation broke out in Gujarat. My cousin Natvarlal Kunthar came to meet me from Kadi and he said: 'They have set fire to the dalit moholla in Detroj Village near Kadi and there are rumours that they are going to do the same to our moholla. Today, some of the women in the moholla were peeling cotton pods when higher caste people came and set fire to the pile of peeled cotton. We have no police protection and nobody in the moholla has slept at night for a long time.'

I arranged a meeting with the governor and she immediately called her ADC and instructed him to take the necessary steps. The ADC rang up the DSP of Mehsana and before Mr. Kunthar reached his village the police had been placed in the moholla. He had later confided that once the police was placed in the moholla those who had planned the violence could not do anything. But stray incidents

of stone pelting continued. The dalits would remain indoors and so the miscreants would go away.

This fire of hatred continued to smoulder in Kadi even after the reservation riots had ended. The incidents of stone pelting in the dalit moholla continued. Their shops on the roadside were burnt down and many of them were badly beaten up. Finally the dalits came to Gandhinagar and went on a hunger strike. The news of their hunger strike was carried out in all the leading newspapers.

While the riots against the reservation issue were going on, I visited the secretariat to meet my friends. There I received the painful news that in Bhulabhai Park in Ahmedabad upper caste residents were throwing lighted torches on the dalit houses. Only a road divided the neighbourhood of the higher caste people from that of the dalits. Mr. Makwana, a Class I officer holding the post of joint director in the treasury department, lived there. His brother was employed at the secretariat and he told some of his friends about the incident. He added, 'We've made several petitions to put a police point at Bhulabhai Park but with no result. Any day they will set fire to our locality.' He also gave a detailed description of all the ministers he had approached. When I came back to Raj Bhavan, I informed the ADC of the governor of what was happening at Bhulabhai Park. He immediately contacted the police commissioner and a police point was set up in the area. Once there was police protection no further attempts were made to set fire to the dalit houses. Up to this moment, Mr. Makwana or his brother do not know how this arrangement had been made possible. I too never talked about it when I met them.

During the reservation riot I was in constant touch with the dalits in the rural area. Mr. Subodh Vaghela was the general manager of the Scheduled Caste Development Corporation and I would meet him very often. I also knew the chairman, Mr. Naranbhai. I used to accompany them often to different villages to console the victims of this destruction. Once we had visited the dalit moholla of Gozaria village. The destruction meted out to people was much more heartbreaking than that to their household goods. I have never been able to erase from my mind the images of their faces, their tears, and their trembling bodies; people who were living under the shadow of constant fear. It is

quite natural that echoes of these experiences should be heard in my writing.

Around this time, I also visited my own moholla in Kalol, which was also affected by the riots. Stone pelting during the day and rumours of fire during the night was the fate of the residents. Watching my beloved home, where I had blossomed, experiencing such tension was absolutely heartrending. I was deeply agitated. A crowd of 40,000 people surrounded the moholla. We kept vigil at night. We patrolled the moholla with sheets tied around our head to avoid being hurt by stones. There was a Muslim colony next to my moholla. When the crowd saw our strange headgear, they thought that we had called the Muslims to patrol our moholla. Immediately the stone throwing stopped and nobody dared to think of setting fire to the moholla. The thought of the Muslims' presence was enough to make them shake in fear. The next day many enquired outside the moholla, 'Did the Muslims come to your moholla at night?' The moholla people laughed at the thought that their headgear had scared the higher caste people who had assumed the presence of Muslims. They also realized what weaklings these higher caste people were. It is only the oppressed, weak and helpless who get beaten up. That is why Dr. Ambedkar said: 'Those who consider themselves strong and capable find only a goat to sacrifice. Why don't they dare to sacrifice a lion?'

During the second riots on the reservation issue, I was posted in Palanpur and lived in a government bungalow called Black Bungalow. One evening somebody threw stones at my house. I immediately came out and looked around. After this incident, no stones were thrown. I wrote my first novel against the backdrop of the reservation riots. I have expressed the pain and suffering of being a dalit in it. The dalits end up being persecuted in all riots, be it communal or on reservation issue. The agony of even the so called 'creamy layer' of the educated dalits cannot be compared with the pain of any community in the world. They still have to wait for many years to live a life of self-respect and honour. In my novel *Shool* there is a strong and assertive character of a dalit girl called Sheela. There is an incident in the novel where she throws a stone at the upper caste Subhash's house and she is holding another stone in her other hand when Subhash and his parents rush out

of their house. The stone that had been thrown at my house had remained in the recess of my mind and I put it in Sheela's hand in the novel.

Here I also want to write about a tribal called Morar who was a butler at Raj Bhavan. He was very good in his job and so we were debating to give him out of turn promotion. When he came to know about it, he came to me and said: 'Saheb, I don't want this promotion.'

When I asked him the reason of his refusal he replied: 'Yogendra is senior to me. He should be promoted first. I don't want to be the cause of his loss of promotion.'

I tried to reason with him, 'You're being promoted for your good performance. You shouldn't refuse it.' In spite of my attempt to convince him he did not accept his promotion. This noble gesture won him praise and, when he retired, his son was given a job at Raj Bhavan.

As I have said earlier, Raj Bhavan has a large staff and I had to carry out my work with a great deal of tact. The place also had a dispensary with a staff consisting of a doctor, a pharmacist, a nurse, maids and ward boys. This was also under my charge. There was a clear division among the staff. Those who came in close contact with the governor, that is, the personal staff, had a superior air about themselves. I held the reins over all of them. I was a strict disciplinarian and insisted that everybody obeyed the rules punctiliously. I knew that cordiality and patience were important factors to maintain discipline. I extracted work sometimes by coaxing and sometimes by a reprimand. When required I had even served a notice to a staff member. There was an employee who was very close to the governor. He became very arrogant as a result and was difficult to manage. I wrote adverse comments in his confidential report and after that he improved. For the first time an employee of Raj Bhavan had to be served a suspension notice. Fortunately I was able to create good rapport with all the governors who came during my tenure. Whenever I requested them for a transfer they would not let me go. I had passed almost four years at Raj Bhavan. I now wanted an exposure of the other government departments. I once again approached both the governor and the secretary and this time I succeeded in convincing them. Little did

I know at that time that my wife Bharti would soon become the reason of my transfer!

Bharti had studied up to third standard. Before our marriage it might have been possible to get a glimpse of God but absolutely impossible to even glance at Bharti's face. Since I had never seen her before our wedding, the question of knowing her simply did not arise. When I brought her home after our marriage we lived in a one room hovel in the moholla. On one side of the room there was a wooden cloth horse on which quilts made from torn clothes were piled up and outside there was a raised open structure like a verandah. All the other members of the house, including the guests who had come for the wedding, slept on this veranda or on charpoys in the open space in the moholla. On the nuptial night till midnight I was with my friends. Everybody had some advice for my first night. They even instructed me to carry sweets. When I entered the room at midnight I found my bride fast asleep. I looked at her innocent face for a long time. She was not only fair complexioned but her face was attractive and beautifully shaped. I had read about ravishingly beautiful fairies and heavenly dancers. It seemed as if this imaginary character had turned real and was lying before me. For a long time I stood there transfixed by her beauty. I had never seen such a beautiful girl in my life. I was overwhelmed with joy. She was still in deep sleep. I gently shook her and she got up startled. I held her hand and felt a shiver pass down her body. I played with her fingers and then held her face with my hands. This was the moment of our long awaited eternal union. I caressed her body and felt the shivers created in her by my touch. To make her talk I played with her bangles and said, 'You're fond of bangles, aren't you?'

She nodded. Her eyes and face reflected her feelings. She spoke very little that night and yet we talked till four in the morning. I do not remember what we had talked about. All I do remember is her pure face in the light of the kerosene lamp. Slowly I put off the lamp.

Next morning, my cousin who had slept on the veranda laughingly thumped me on my back and said, 'We could hear you both very clearly.'

I wondered, was the throbbing of our hearts inside the transparent house of mud plastered floor and tiled roof so loud that it was audible outside!

In the beginning, my family and some others in the moholla had some reservations about Bharti. They felt she was not good enough for me because she was not well educated. Our married life turned out to be a very happy one. Once when we were visiting a friend in Nadiad, his wife observing our evident closeness had commented, 'Did you know each other before marriage? Was it a love marriage?' The head priest of the Gebi Temple in our moholla, Janakidasji, was always delighted to see us. He had great affection for us. He had once told us, 'I always quote the example of your happy marriage wherever I go for a discourse. May God always grant you happiness!'

Bharti proved to be a big support in my life. In 1969 when I became mamlatdar in Dholka, I had to maintain a certain life style as the administrative head. At that time I had no proper furniture or crockery. I bought from a utensil shop a set of six stainless steel plates, twelve bowls and a dozen spoons on credit. I paid the owner back in instalments every month. We had no chairs in the house so we bought two cheap wooden folding chairs. These wooden chairs with cloth covers were known as 'royal chairs', which we bought from a shop in Dholka. Bharti cooked on a kerosene stove and in aluminium vessels. This was the beginning of my life as a government officer. Though she was the wife of a government officer Bharti showed no arrogance or conceit. I had to send home money regularly as the financial situation of the family had still not improved. I could not buy her any piece of jewellery. She wore a gold plated chain around her neck. Once when we were visiting home in Kalol, one of my sisters-in-law had asked, 'How many grams of gold does it have?'

Bharti looked at me and we both laughed. She replied, 'There is no gold in it. It is an imitation chain.'

The sister-in-law quipped, 'What do you take us to be? Fools? I can see that it is a gold chain.'

We laughed at her comment. Bharti's saris too were inexpensive. We did not have the means to buy any expensive clothes at that time. But she was so pretty that whatever she wore looked

attractive. Even an inexpensive sari acquired a 'rich' look when she wore it. She attended all the official lunch and dinner parties with me at Raj Bhavan. Other officers' wives used to admire her saris and often enquired their price. She never hesitated to tell them the correct price but they would never believe her. At times somebody would even tell her that she had a good sense of humour.

She wore glass bangles to the parties as she did not have any gold ones. But she never complained. Her simplicity radiated her true beauty. Her loving and tolerant nature helped her to get along with everyone. I do not remember her ever having any misunderstanding with anyone. Though she was not well educated, she had a deep understanding of things. Her candid smile overwhelmed me. In her presence I never experienced the tiredness of life. Whenever we visited Mrs. Mukerjee, Bharti spoke to her with ease. In one of the functions she had sat next to Mrs. Mukerjee at the dinner table, and later whenever she saw the photograph of herself conversing with the governor, she was thrilled.

As I have written earlier, in the initial days of my posting in Raj Bhavan, we used to reside in the Sector 19. Our neighbour then was Mr. C. K. Koshi, who was an IAS officer. We had a very close relationship with his family. After he left, Mr. Avinashkumar came to live there. His wife, Anupritaben, became a close friend of Bharti. They went for walks together. There was a club for the wives of the IAS officers, and Bharti attended many functions with Anupritaben. Once she had a party at our house where they had played various indoor games, sang songs, told jokes and had a great time. One day some of the members objected to Bharti's attending these parties because she was a state-level officer's wife. On that day both Anupritaben and Bharti left the party, and later they formed a separate club with other officers' wives.

On 7 October 1981, a son was born to us after two daughters and Bharti's happiness knew no bounds. I stayed home, taking leave from the office. We distributed sweets to everybody at Raj Bhavan. After our second daughter was born in 1973 in Dholka, I had not wanted any more children. But Bharti wanted a son, and had kept many vows to get a son. I never stopped her in any of these activities. Diwali was just twenty days after our son's birth, so we decided to celebrate it in a grand way. Until then I had not

given Bharti a single piece of jewellery, so I took her to Ahmedabad and bought her a beautiful set of necklace, matching bracelet and earrings. It had an intricate design. She was overjoyed to get this set. I also bought her an expensive sari and for our daughters expensive dresses from a reputed shop. I got two suits stitched for myself and bought Bata's leather 'ambassador' shoes. That year's Diwali was going to be an occasion of ultimate happiness. Then, suddenly two days before Diwali on the Wagh Baras—twelfth day in the month of Ashwin (mid-September to mid-October)—Bharti started to get convulsions. She had developed some post-delivery complications. She was immediately admitted to the Civil Hospital at Gandhinagar. When she did not respond to the treatment there, the doctor there advised us to take her to Ahmedabad, and I immediately took her to the V. S. Hospital there. Mrs. Mukerjee had telephoned the hospital and all arrangements were kept ready for her. Her room was filled with doctors. The neurologist and neurosurgeon too were present. They had even called an outside neurosurgeon to examine her. A battery of tests was done and a number of doctors tended to her. The day before Diwali her condition worsened. I wept uncontrollably. I even arranged for money for her brain scan at a Mumbai hospital. I sat near her bed day and night and she just stared at me wide eyed. Tears flowed from her eyes but she could not speak because of the convulsions. At midnight my brother-in-law—Bharti's brother—Lakhshman begged me to rest, saying that he would stay by her side. But I could not leave Bharti. I sat in a chair but my eyes were on her. Suddenly the convulsions stopped—Bharti had left us forever. I ran to the doctor. He came and after examining her declared her dead. A great misfortune had befallen me. When I came home every object in the house carried Bharti's memory.

I now wanted to leave this house and this place. I requested both the governor and her secretary for my transfer. I told them about my mental condition, and they eventually agreed. Fate had ordained Bharti to become the cause of my transfer.

At first, my mother-in-law stayed with us. My son was only twenty days old and my daughters—eight and eleven years old. Everybody, including my family, my mother-in-law and others in the moholla started pressing me to marry again. I resisted for

sometime and finally yielded to their pressure. In February 1982 I married Hasumati, a schoolteacher from Siddhpur. Before our marriage I went to meet her at Siddhpur. I have never been able to forget that I had carried the ashes of Bharti to the banks of Saraswati and had immersed them into the river. On the same banks I now sat discussing our new life with the woman who would be my second wife in the near future. I have not ceased to wonder at the perversity of fate.

I was transferred to Godhra as the land acquisition officer. The secretary to the planning department, Mr. V. R. S. Cowlagi, wanted to put me in Mehsana district as the district planning officer, but Mehsana district being my hometown I could not be transferred there. So finally I was transferred to Palanpur in Banaskantha district as the district planning officer. After Bharti's death I had been continuously on leave. Finally, the governor intervened and my Godhra posting was cancelled. An employee in the chief minister's office held a grudge against me and was responsible for stalling my transfer. This person had not vacated his official quarter for a year after he had been transferred. I had sent him a letter asking him to pay one year's rent. The letter had the signature of the secretary. So he now took his revenge on me in this manner. I have often been a victim of such stings in my career. Often I would come to know about such incidents much later.

Mr. Shankarlal Jadav and Mr. Mahadev Desai had been my teachers in the primary school. Mr. Jadav had come to see me in the matter of his son's salary which he had not received. Mr. Desai came with a different request, 'I'm going to retire soon and a farewell function has been organized at Kalol. I want the governor to grace this occasion.'

The governor had never before attended any farewell function of a teacher. But Mahadevbhai insisted and said as my teacher he had a right to make such a demand. I asked him to call the chairman of the municipality. Then I arranged the governor's tour of Kalol and included this function in her itinerary. The farewell function was held in the Town Hall. When the governor attended the function Mr. Desai's joy knew no bounds. Years later he became the chairman of the Gopalak Board.

45. Palanpur

Whereas Palanpur is the land of roses and the fragrance of ittar, the land that resonates with Gujarati gazals, Banaskantha is one of the far-flung districts of Gujarat. Wandering in the distant villages of the Vav and Tharad talukas of this district, I found the inhabitants dressed in Rajasthani attire and people referred to Gujarat as 'Little Marwad'. I went right up to the Pakistan border and met the jawans of the Border Security Force. The border of Rajasthan starts after Amirgadh village amidst the Arravalli hills. In this drought-prone area, I had heard the heartthrobs of people living amidst arid hills and mirages of the desert. As district planning officer, I was the member secretary of the District Planning Board. The general administration department had issued a resolution handing over all the developmental projects of the district to the District Planning Board. As a result I had the freedom to visit any office in the district and examine the projects of the different corporations funded by the board.

The District Planning Boards were set up in every district of Gujarat as an attempt to decentralize governmental work. Each board was headed by a minister and the collector worked as the deputy chairman. Hence I had to report both to the minister and the collector. Banaskantha was then a poorly developed district of Gujarat. In many parts, even basic amenities like water, roads and education were not available. So the first thing I did was to carry out a detailed survey of each taluka. Then I brought out a booklet on each taluka, listing the basic amenities needed. Realizing the lack of education in the district, I asked the teachers to prepare an eighteen-column report on the schools: number of students,

number of classrooms, and other information. This I brought out as a book. I also gathered information on facts such as which villages lacked roads, water supply, and so on. Another booklet carried a detailed map of the district, listing the projects and the location of its operation. My objective was to provide all information on the district in one place. The cover page of this booklet carried the following lines from Umashanker Joshi's poem:

> What I found nowhere
> I located in the map.

In all I prepared around twenty such booklets carrying information on Banaskantha district. The district had faced three consecutive droughts in four years. It had no large industry and its natural resources were yet to be tapped. For instance, the hills of Ambaji had an abundance of marble which is now being quarried. The Department of General Administration introduced a reward scheme whereby two cash prizes worth Rs13 lakhs and Rs12 lakhs was to be given to the district that collected the highest public fund to be used for any project. There was also a grant amount of Rs7 lakhs that could be availed. I found that the district planning grants remained unused for years, especially in the backward and tribal districts. I started to work out a plan to avail these grants. I raised a public fund from this backward district, got a matching fund from the government, and started the work of construction of classrooms in many schools.

I received a great deal of cooperation from the Nadiad-based Hari Om Ashram in this endeavour. To my and the district's surprise, Banaskantha bagged the first prize of Rs13 lakhs. Next year it again got the first prize and in the third year it received a sum of Rs12 lakhs as second prize. One year it also secured the grant amount of Rs7 lakhs. I had worked relentlessly—day and night—for this and as a fruit of this hard work, this backward district gained Rs45 lakhs as reward money. I was in this district for four years and every year it won the prize money. Earlier Banaskantha did not figure anywhere in the district offices' list in Gujarat. But I brought glory to this district. During my four years' tenure, four chairmen and four collectors had headed the board and I faced no

problem working under them. In the neighbouring district whenever the Planning Board met, police protection was sought. In Palanpur, on the contrary, the meetings were conducted peacefully and amicably. Our board members comprised Members of Legislative Assembly and Members of Parliament. Even the opposition party members of the Assembly praised our work at the board meetings. The Planning Board was in fact a mini legislative assembly. Here all the projects of the district had to be discussed. Hence I had to constantly train, supervise and extract work from the officers under me. Some projects I examined personally and if I found any irregularity I reported it immediately.

At the state level there are separate grants for the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. But no separate grants were allotted to these categories in the District Planning Board. So the use of the grant money for the welfare of these categories depended on the whims of the officer in charge. I saw that if there were separate grants earmarked for these categories, much could be done for the development of these people. I put this idea to the local legislative members and the development workers. There was good response from the other districts too, and finally a portion of the grant was earmarked for the development work for the scheduled castes and tribes. Thereafter I used to approach the chairman and the deputy chairman boldly with my plans for the development of these classes. Many did not approve of my excessive interest in the problems of the deprived classes. I knew that besides the problems of the dalits and the tribals, the district also had many backward talukas which needed attention. Some of the talukas like, Vav, Tharad, and Dhanera were extremely underdeveloped. Danta and Palanpur talukas had two tribal pockets. If I did not make a strong presentation of these areas they would suffer. As expected, a good taluka voices its problems more strongly than the weak ones. My attempt was for the equitable development of all the talukas.

Mr. Jagadishan was the district development officer and he took a keen interest in developmental work. Proper implementation of the projects depends largely on the ability and keenness of the district development officer. I remember an incident with Mr. Jagadishan very clearly. We had decided to build four hundred classrooms for primary schools. Some funds had been collected

with the help of Nadiad's Hari Om Ashram. Mr. Jagadishan called a meeting in his office. The meeting continued till midnight and nobody had had any dinner. I too often missed meals when I was under pressure of work. Jagadishan called up Banas restaurant to order some snacks for all of us. The restaurant had closed down, but its owner prepared some idlis for us and sent to his office. I remember working till two in the night with Mr. Bokhani, the deputy district development officer.

There is a separate committee comprising the chief secretary, the additional chief secretary and the planning division secretary, which appoints the district planning officer. The district planning officer is entitled to a special pay every month. Most of my batchmates did not much care for this post, however, I gained immensely from it. It gave me a good exposure to the working of the entire state's development work which helped me immensely in the later stage of my career.

Just as there is a lot of scope for irregularities in the relief work, in development work too corruption is rampant. I was always alert and immediately reported any case of irregularity that came to my notice. I remember, in a case, grant money allotted for laying the pipeline for the dalit colony had been used for laying pipelines of the entire village and the expenses were shown in the component grant plan which was for the scheduled castes. Whenever I came across such cases I never hesitated to expose the guilty. I would warn the officers in the meeting of never ever indulging in such practices.

Once I remember I went to oversee the work of construction of classrooms in a primary school. It was lunch time, and under the project of mid-day meals, the children had sat down to eat their lunch. Suddenly I noticed that three children were sitting at some distance from the other boys. I could guess the reason at once. When I spoke to the boys I found out that they were dalits. I immediately reprimanded the teacher and made the boys sit with the others. When I discussed this with the teacher I realized how regressive the attitudes of the residents of this village were. In this same taluka once a dalit teacher was appointed in a primary school. The entire village collectively decided to boycott the school not for a day or two, but an entire month. The teacher, however, continued to report to work sharp at eleven and remained present

till evening. The people of the village moved heaven and earth to get him transferred. How should I put it—it reflected the backward mind-set of the backward district! Education had made no dent on it! After this incident whenever I visited any primary school I made it a point to remain present at the time of the mid-day meal and ensured that dalit children sat with the rest. I even drew the attention of the district officer to this fact.

The government had proposed a general resolution (GR) stating that the officer should include the dalit mohollas in his tour of the village. I wonder how many follow it! The government also needs to ensure that the resolution is being followed by the officers. Now the government has also made the provision of making a note of it in the confidential report of the officer. But all these are only prescriptions confined to the scriptures. However, I always made it a point to visit the dalit moholla whenever I toured the villages, where I would discuss at length with the dalits about the availability of loans from various projects, and instruct them on how to apply, where to apply, how much they were entitled to get, and so on. I also gathered information about their children and their education. I would ask them to visit my office for any information they needed regarding projects. Whenever I visited the dalit mohollas I felt that in spite of Dr. Ambedkar's intensive agitation time had stood still! It hurt me to discover that many had not even heard the name of Dr. Ambedkar. It is not just the dalits who were ignorant; once to my great shock I found that a sarpanch in one of the distant villages in the Vav and Tharad talukas could not name the prime minister. These days whenever I read in the newspapers about the howlers made by graduates at job interviews, I am reminded of the sarpanchs of those distant places.

Mr. Sureshbhai Mehta was the chairman of the municipality when I was posted in Palanpur. He was a very hardworking and honest person. He had a motor garage in Palanpur where he worked as a mechanic. He would refuse to hike the repair bill whenever the drivers of government cars asked him to do so. He never tolerated any kind of dishonesty in his garage. I got along well with him. A large amount had been sanctioned to the corporation from the planning grant for building roads, bridges and also to provide adequate water supply. From this grant, for the first time, broad

roads were built and bore wells were dug in the backward and Muslim areas of Palanpur. Sureshbhai supervised these activities himself and brought about a radical change in the infrastructure of the town. He was later elected Member of the Legislative Assembly and went on to become a minister. But his respect and affection for me remained unchanged.

The house in which I lived in Palanpur was known as Black Bungalow because during the British rule this house used to be allotted to the black (Indian) officers. The bungalow where the British officers used to stay was known as Golden Bungalow. At present it is the residence of the district collector. When Panchayati Raj was implemented, the Black Bungalow was allotted to the district development officer. But once the district panchayat built its staff quarters, the district development officer shifted there. The bungalow was then renovated and with some addition was divided into two residential quarters and these were now assigned to Class I officers. Most officers avoided staying in this house and preferred a house in the city. It was generally used as transit accommodation till a proper house in the city was located. When I was posted in Palanpur, in the beginning I stayed in the dalit moholla because nobody from the upper caste residential area would rent a house to me. But I desperately wanted government accommodation and so I wrote to the collector and the allotment committee members. In spite of the government resolution of 1967 regarding housing allotment, I was not sanctioned a house. After some time when Mr. Ghasura, a Class I officer, refused the Black Bungalow, I was given the house. I immediately shifted there. Before I had moved in a dalit officer used to reside in one portion of the house.

The Black Bungalow was very far from the city. There was no habitation around it. It was like a huge farmhouse. There were open fields at the back and the day after we moved in we saw a huge cobra sliding by our compound wall. It slithered quietly, occasionally raising its hood. The sight was so terrifying that we kept all the doors and the windows of the house shut all the time.

One night it was raining very heavily. The loud clap of thunder woke me up and when I looked out I found it was pouring heavily, accompanied with thunder and lightening. I was worried about

the kitchen because though the house was built with reinforced cement the kitchen had been added later and so it had only a tiled roof. Monkeys had broken some of the tiles and so I went in to assess the damage caused by this rain. I found that the roof leaked at several places and the kitchen was full of water. I started to place buckets and pots under the places wherever the water dribbled down.When I looked up I found that at one place the gap was so large that a person could easily come down through it. I had repeatedly sent in requests to the assistant engineer, general construction department, to repair the roof. I had followed it up by making telephone calls and even talked to him at a meeting. But he always evaded the issue by saying he was waiting for the grant money. It amazed me, because this was not a big expense and there would always be some spare tiles in the store. Had the job been for the collector, it would have been done in a jiffy! Not just that, he would have approached the collector and asked, 'Anything needs to be done, Sir?'

The torrential rain continued with the roar of the thunder and the crackle of the lightning. The rest of the house slept soundly. I did not wake up anyone and went on placing pots and pans under the leaking roof. I remembered my childhood days. During the monsoon we had to work in the same manner to protect ourselves from the leaking roof. In fact, in those days, we often ran out of vessels. Looking anxiously at the roof, I realized that a snake could easily slide through that gap. I was reminded of another incident from my childhood when I had seen a long snake sliding under the tiles. I remembered the cobra near our wall. Would it slip down the gap between the broken tiles? I could hear the hooting of an owl outside. The night seemed to become more frightening as the hours ticked away. I spent the entire night under the shadow of fear and anxiety.

After about a month at the Black Bungalow, I had to attend a meeting at Gandhinagar. I was going to be back the same day but because the meeting continued for a long time, I had to stay back that night. I called home and informed Hasumati and also gave her the telephone number of the circuit house in case any emergency arose. This was the first time Hasumati and the children were going to spend the night without me in this house. My son, Bhargav,

whose pet name is Munna, was just four years old. Suddenly he screamed and woke up. He held out his little finger to Hasumati and cried out, 'The snake bit me here.'

At first, Hasumati thought that he had had a nightmare. She took him on her lap and tried to put him back to sleep. It was very late and outside the darkness was dense. Munna would not go back to sleep. He kept screaming and said repeatedly looking at the door: 'There's the snake . . . it is coming . . . it is coming.'

Hasumati was now frightened. She realized it was not a nightmare because Munna was wide awake. Perhaps, she thought, he was paralysed with the fear of the snake that he had seen in his dream and now he was not able to get rid of that image. He kept crying loudly, 'The snake bit me here.'

She tried to assure him by saying, 'No, beta, no. There isn't any snake here. You had a nightmare. Look, is there any blood on your finger?'

But he could not be consoled. He would stare at his finger and shout, 'The snake is here. Look, there it is.'

It were as if only Munna could see the snake!

Nobody slept that night. They spent the night in fear and anxiety. Munna's screams of the snake made Hasumati wonder fearfully that perhaps the snake *was* inside the house and Munna had seen it moving around. The terrifying darkness and the hooting of the owl outside added to her panic. She spent the night sitting up with the children on the bed, not daring to get down and call the circuit house. The telephone cord too appeared to her like a long snake. Munna cried and screamed all night, and in the morning he had a fever.

I too, like Munna, had once become a victim of fear of snakes and had a fever.This happened when I was undergoing training as a probationary mamlatdar in Vadodara under the mamlatdar of Padra taluka. I had put up in the resthouse and went to the doctor's mess for my meals. The mess was at a distance from the village and to reach there I had to cross a field. Sometimes on my way to the mess I saw snakes slithering past. Once, a snake went past my feet. The resthouse too had a fair share of snakes. One afternoon I came out hearing the shrill sound of birdcalls. When I looked up a tree as the sound was coming from there, I found to my horror

a black snake moving among the branches. I could not climb the tree and though I wanted to save the birds I was afraid of the snake. I asked the watchman, 'Do you know how to climb a tree?'

He replied, 'Saheb, what is the point? The snake will not come down till it has had its fill. This is not the first time that a snake has climbed up a tree. I've seen it do so often. You have come from the city and so you find it disturbing.'

I asked him if he were scared of snakes. He replied, 'I would be scared if there were only one snake. The place is infested with them. I'm now quite used to their presence. Come, I'll show you another snake.'

He took me behind the rest house. A pit had been dug up there. He asked me to look into it. I looked into it carefully and to my horror found a snake coiled up. He explained, 'Saheb, this place is full of trees and so the birds too are found in plenty. The snakes come here to find easy prey. In the beginning I had caught this snake once or twice and had let it off at a distance but it would come back because there is food here.' I asked him again if he were not frightened.

He answered, 'Of course I'm scared. But what is the alternative? I have a job.' Then, he added hesitantly, 'Saheb, this is the sanctified place of Bhathi Khatri. There is a temple dedicated to this deity. The snake will not bite unless the person has committed a hundred sins. There is a worshipper of *Bhathiji*–a bhuva–who knows how to take out poison. So there is nothing to worry.'

A month before this incident I read in the newspaper about a woman dying in Padra of snakebite. I pointed this out to the watchman. He said, 'But Saheb, if she was destined to die, what can the bhuva do?'

All I could do was to stare at the watchman in disbelief.

The resthouse was under repair and so there were large openings in the side and back walls. These openings were large enough for a man to enter. The rest house was very old and so many of its walls needed to be built again. I was forced to live there because Padra did not have another rest house. During the day I was busy in the mamlatdar's office and so faced no problem, but the nights were very difficult, I kept thinking of the snake. On a holiday I was at the rest house during the day and I saw the snake on the tree.

Afterwards I could not take the snake off my mind. At night when I returned from the mess after dinner, I went to sleep thinking about it. Suddenly, I was woken up by the loud chirping of the birds. It was midnight and I realized that there was no possibility of getting any sleep now. The images of that snake hanging from the tree and the other one coiled up in the pit kept haunting me. My eyes were glued to the opening in the wall. Would the snake enter through that gap? Somewhere far away an owl hooted and intermittently the sound of a bird flying and rustling of leaves could be heard. I kept feeling that the snake was going to get in through the opening. The fear gripped me so forcefully that I could not even get down from my bed. What if the snake glided over my feet! The hands of the clock seemed to move very slowly and I desperately waited for the day to break. There was not an iota of sleep in my eyes. I kept tossing in bed and every time I tried to close my eyes I was petrified with the thought—what if the snake climbed the bed! I remembered the incident of the woman dying of snakebite. I broke into cold sweat. The ceiling fan seemed to throw up fire! My eyes kept looking at the hole and, then, suddenly, I saw a tail. I lost the last bit of the little courage that I had mustered up. I shouted for the watchman. Then I shouted again. But there was no trace of that man. My eyes were glued to the opening. Then I suddenly realized it was only a gecko. There was some relief, but I could not get rid of the image of the snake from my mind. When the day broke I felt quite feverish.

46. Once More at Raj Bhavan

I had spent four years in Palanpur when one day I received a phone call from Raj Bhavan. The post of the comptroller of household to the governor of Gujarat had fallen vacant. The state government had sent in the names of five officers to be interviewed for this post and my name did not appear in the list. H. E. Mr. R. K. Trivedi was the governor at that time. He asked his secretary to ring me up and ask me to come for the interview. He had called me as one of the former officers of Raj Bhavan. I knew that the time for a new posting had arrived and I was now keen to go to Gandhinagar, especially for the sake of my children's education. The governor interviewed the candidates himself. My interview went on for a long time. For almost half an hour the governor questioned me. He then said to me, 'I've come to know from old files that you had succeeded in cutting down the expenses of Raj Bhavan. So I want you to come back.' As I too was keen to be back in Gandhinagar, I accepted the offer. But Mr. Nalinbhai Patel, the minister and chairman of the District Planning Board, was reluctant to let me go. When I met him, he first refused, but because it was a government order for Raj Bhavan, he could do nothing. He said, 'Had it not been an order of the government, I wouldn't have allowed you to leave. During your tenure a lot of good work has been done.'

I left the District Planning Board and came to Raj Bhavan. However, my association with Nalinbhai continued. Once when I had invited him and Mr. Lalitbhai Patel, a state government minister, to a function at my home, they both came very willingly. Another time I had called them for a tree planting function at Raj Bhavan

Vasahat. I was not acquainted with Lalitbhai Patel earlier. One day his secretary, Jhaverbhai Chavda, came to me and said, 'Mr. Lalitbhai wants to meet you. Could you go and see him?' That was the beginning of my association with Lalitbhai.

I worked hard to improve the life of the staff of Raj Bhavan. For the first time, a nursery, a library and sewing classes were started in Raj Bhavan Vasahat. At first, I used to buy newspapers and magazines for the library, but later the money came from Raj Bhavan funds. I was keen that the children living in Raj Bhavan Vasahat use their leisure time fruitfully and develop the reading habit. I also wanted the women to be engaged usefully and so started tailoring classes for them. Many women afterwards bought their own sewing machines and stitched children's clothes at home. Ramanbhai, another resident, sold these clothes at the shopping centre in Sector 21. Even today his cart can be found at that shopping centre. This way it became possible for some of the family members of the staff to remain engaged and also add to the family income.

I set up two mango orchards at Raj Bhavan Vasahat. There was a large plot of land which had been earmarked for building Raj Bhavan but had remained vacant. I planted around 450 mango saplings in this plot. I instructed the gardener to graft the kesar variety of mango on some of the plants. Ten different varieties of mangoes were planted—dasheri, aafoos, langra, nilfanso, alfanso, mallika, amrapalli, begampalli, barmasi, and badam. I made the gardener graft in such a way that four varieties of mangoes grew on one tree. I got these different varieties of mangoes from different places, like the nilfanso and alphanso from the forest department, mallika and amrapalli from Vidyanagar, and begampalli and barmasi from Ditala village in Dhari taluka. The farmer of Ditala village had around hundred varieties of mangoes. He had also shown me a newspaper cutting stating that research on growing a seedless variety of mango was being done in Madras. In developing these orchards I had no separate staff; I took care of the orchards myself. I remember at times I even chased stray cattle from the orchard, running after them with a stick. Neelgais were also a nuisance. They would come from the river bank, jump over the fence and eat up all the leaves. I had to build a high fence to prevent them

from getting into the orchard. This work was not part of my job; I did it because I enjoyed doing it. I was only putting a piece of wasteland to good use. I had also planted medicinal and fruit saplings around the orchard. There were twenty-five each of amla, billi, and areetha plants. Besides, there were also pomegranate, custard apple, guava, and chiku plants. Indeed it became a very impressive orchard over a period of time and today, the children of the staff of Raj Bhavan are enjoying the fruits of these orchards. However, I have yet to taste a mango from these orchards.

Once a friend and a school mate, Maneklal, visited me. He is a farmer and has plenty of land. He told me that he had planted around 150 kesar saplings in his mango orchard but only five survived. He was taken aback when I told him that out of 150 kesars that I had planted, only five had died. He asked me, 'Look, I'm a farmer and yet of the 150 plants I had planted, I could save only five. In your orchard you have managed to keep alive 145 plants out of 150. How did you achieve this?'

I answered, 'I've nurtured them with selfless love.'

For the first time, I experienced the truth of the renowned botanist Jagadish Chandra Bose's statement that trees have life. Our scriptures have also stated that 'if you grow one tree you will earn the reward of bringing up ten children.' I have always considered trees to be gods. There is a mantra in the Vedas, '*vruksha devthabhyo namah*': 'I bow to the God who manifests in the trees.'

The agriculture minister, Vijaydas Mahant, too had once come to my house to attend a function. He was very enthusiastic about the experiment of grafting different varieties of mangoes on one tree. So anybody visiting him would be asked to see the mango tree at the Agriculture Farm in Vidyanagar. I too had done a similar grafting after being influenced by this success. Some of the other dignitaries who visited my house were the collector of Gandhinagar, Ritaben Tewatia, Upendra Trivedi, Naranbhai Modi, B. A. Shukla, and P. K. Valera. Many IAS and IPS officers came to my house and I too was often invited with my family to attend their parties. I also had the opportunity to meet the vice chancellors of the universities in Gujarat, thanks to the fact that the governor was the chancellor in all these places. Once, a vice chancellor had come with a box of sweets after his appointment. The High Court judges

had their oath-taking ceremony at Raj Bhavan, and so I got to know some of them.

There was another interesting incident associated with the repair of the governor's Mercedes car. The ADC to the governor had taken the car to Mumbai and he quoted Rs2.5 lakhs as the estimated expenses of repairing, which the governor found to be too high and so he asked me to look into it. I called a mechanic from an Ahmedabad garage who knew how to repair a Mercedes car and asked him to make a list of the spare parts needed to repair the car engine. Then I took him to Mumbai and together we went around ten dealers who specialized in selling these spares. I bought the spares listed, ensuring their genuineness both by checking the mark and also consulting the mechanic. Then I got the car repaired. The total cost was less than Rs50,000. This car, even after ten years, has had no problem.

I had returned to Raj Bhavan to my earlier position of comptroller of household to the governor on 31 January 1987, which displeased many people. They started picking faults in me. Some of the employees who had been recruited at my behest too joined this disgruntled group. A rot had set in the administration. Was it perhaps because of some people using Raj Bhavan for their personal gain? Whatever may be the reason, in the end I lost more than what I had gained from this place. Earlier Raj Bhavan functioned like a family. Personal gain was not given much importance.

My wife Hasumati had worked as a teacher at Palanpur. Earlier, she used to teach in a school at Siddhpur but when I was transferred to Palanpur, she had applied for a transfer and the municipality chairman had immediately posted her to Palanpur. After I came to Raj Bhavan she could not get a transfer to Gandhinagar for one and a half years. She had no leave pending and so she stayed with me at Gandhinagar on leave without pay. When I did not succeed in getting her transferred to Gandhinagar, I thought we would try for a transfer to Ahmedabad, and so I asked her to send in an application to the municipal corporation there. I also met the concerned officer. When the interview date was fixed, Hasumati was asked to report along with others. When I rang up the chairman of the interview board, I accidentally came to know of the conspiracy

behind my back. One of the officers from Raj Bhavan had already requested the chairman not to recruit Hasumati. The chairman was a neighbour of this officer and they belonged to the same caste. When I rang up he had thought that officer had called and so he said, 'It will be done according to your wish. She will not get in.'

This was not hearsay; I had heard it myself.

After sometime this education officer visited Raj Bhavan. She said to me, 'You know that officer had asked that she not be given the job, otherwise I had no other reason to refuse her. I was forced to take a negative decision.' But I never let this incident come in the way of our relationship. I still have a good relationship with this officer. We met last in 2000 when I was invited to the Independence Day 'at home' party at Raj Bhavan. He talked to me as if we were very close acquaintances. He too, like the proverbial elephant, had two sets of teeth—one decorative and the other for chewing. So much of poison I have had to consume in my life! Today when I look back I feel that at Raj Bhavan I had worked with a deadly poisonous snake.

After one and a half years, Hasumati was transferred to Gandhinagar District Panchayat School in a distant village called Valad. Every day she had to change two buses to reach Valad and then walk to the school. When the governor came to know about her arduous journey, he expressed his regret at Hasumati's not getting the transfer to Ahmedabad and asked me to work out some other arrangement. He also talked to the officer who had rejected her. The post of the Language P.A. to the governor was vacant. Hasumati was taken on this vacancy and then sent on deputation to the Tribal Development Corporation. But once she joined the corporation, that officer started inciting the staff there. The union then started questioning her appointment. The situation became so rife with trouble that she came back to Raj Bhavan and applied for leave. They wanted her to give up her job at Raj Bhavan. It was now a question of her losing the job altogether. Meanwhile the post of deputy section officer in the Lokayukta office fell vacant. They were willing to take her on deputation and so she was placed there.

Initially the officer who had caused all the trouble could not harm her in this position and she was absorbed temporarily for a period of three years in this office. But he did not give up. Once this period was over, everybody except Hasumati got an extension. Once again she faced the prospect of sitting at home without a job. Then I requested the district development officer at Gandhinagar to put her back in the earlier post. Finally, she was given back her post of a teacher in the district panchayat and was posted in a school in Pindayada village, where she continues to work even now. Once the Gujarat State Construction Corporation had advertised for filling up a backlog post for the scheduled castes. Hasumati applied for the post. She had the relevant qualification and experience–she was a dalit woman, she held two postgraduate degrees of MA and LLB and also had administrative experience. The corporation realized that they could not deny her the post and so did not release the interview calls. When I went to find out the reason, I was told that they had asked for an additional grant for the post from the department. I was surprised. Why would they need additional grant for this backlog post? The salary of this post would any way come from the sanctioned grant used to pay the salary of the existing staff. The interview calls were never given out. I later came to know that they had advertised under the government's pressure and had no intention of taking anyone in that post. Was it only a ploy to please the government? It would make the government happy to think that the process of filling up the backlog post had been initiated.

Once, a sweeper who lived in the slums of the Sector 27 came to me for a job. There was no vacancy at that time, but soon one of the sweepers of Raj Bhavan went on leave and so I took this boy on a temporary basis on leave vacancy. After fifteen days the regular sweeper came back and this boy had to leave. Looking at his sad face I called him and gave him a certificate of his conduct at Raj Bhavan and told him, 'When you apply for a job, enclose this certificate. If there is an opening for a peon anywhere, you send in your application and let me know.'

After sometime he came back to me and said that he had applied at a government office for the post of a peon and gave me the details. I rang up the concerned officer and fortunately

he got selected. At present he is working as a peon and his good conduct has earned him a job at a government official's place. He had come with a box of sweets and garland after he got his appointment letter. At that time I lived in the government quarters in Sector 9 and was no longer at Raj Bhavan. I took a sweet from the box and returned the rest to him.When he tried to garland me, I asked him to put it on the photograph of Dr. Ambedkar. After garlanding the photograph, he asked me, 'Saheb, is this your father's photograph?'

I nodded. The man had not even heard the name of Dr. Ambedkar, so how could he have seen his photograph?

When I look back today, I realize that I had lost much more than I had gained by being at Raj Bhavan. In 1988, the general administrative department sent a letter to the governor stating: 'We are planning to promote Mr. Jadav to the post of additional collector. Do let us know whether you can release him or you want to keep him there by upgrading his post.' If my position was not upgraded then I would be placed elsewhere on a higher position. In September 1988 a reply was sent from Raj Bhavan to the department stating: 'Mr. Jadav will remain here and his post will be upgraded.' A request for upgrading the post was sent to the government in September 1988 and the order was released by the government on 12 December 1988, but the notification stating my appointment was not issued. On 31 December 1988 I went to the general administration department and met the secretary. He immediately called the deputy secretary and asked him to release the notification the same day. The deputy secretary called the under secretary and the section officer. The under secretary said, 'We'll certainly do it in a day or two. A little delay is not going to cause much harm.'

So the order was not issued that day. The next day being Sunday was a holiday. Finally the order was released on 3 January 1989. This little delay caused a big set back in my career. Besides the financial loss in my salary, I lost a chance of being allotted a larger plot of land to build a house. The government had passed a general resolution to distribute land for housing to government employees at a subsidized rate. It stated that those officers who were in the rank of deputy secretary as on 31 December 1988 would be allotted a plot of 200 sq. metres to 250 sq. metres. Because my appointment notification was released on 3 January 1989, I could

not get a 250 sq. metres plot and was given a smaller plot of 135 sq. metres. A delay of two days became a technical issue and in spite of all my effort I could not get a bigger plot. I had attached the letter stating that my post had been upgraded on 12 December 1988 but it was of no avail. Then because I was fighting for an allotment of a bigger plot I delayed the construction of the house and as a result I was fined twice. Finally, I built the house on this small plot and this is where I live now. People generally name their house after their father or mother or God, like *Pitrusmruti*, *Matrusruti*, or *Harisadan*, but I decided to call my house *Shool*, a thorn. I spent Rs 400 and engraved the name in gold on a granite stone and it adorns my entrance.

I was getting more and more dissatisfied with my life at Raj Bhavan. I would often feel nostalgic about my earlier days there. Finally, I wrote a letter asking for a transfer. The governor did not release me for another year. Eventually, I was transferred but I had not received the official order. Meanwhile, the person who had been sent in my post came to Raj Bhavan to take over the charge. I was waiting for my orders but since he had already reported for work, I had to hand over charge. Now I was free of my job at Raj Bhavan but did not know where I was going to be placed. Then I was placed in the civil supply in Ahmedabad as the area manager. But the civil supply secretary wanted somebody else in that post so I was not allowed to join. Earlier too, my posting as district planning officer at Palanpur had taken a long time and I had to be on leave for that interim period. The same situation was repeated here. I went back to the general administration department and pleaded my case. They sent me back to the Department of Civil Supply. I kept shunting between these two bodies and finally exasperated I gave my joining report to the secretary, which he very reluctantly accepted. After a long time, this order was cancelled and I was made the managing director of the Leather Industry Development Corporation. At every step in my career I had to face the red tape of the bureaucracy. I experienced the truth of the saying in Gujarati–'crows are black everywhere'.

47. Managing Director

The leather industry has not realized its potential in Gujarat. Around 90 per cent of the leather produced by Gujarat is sent to Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh for processing, which is then in turn bought at a high price by the leather goods manufacturers of Gujarat. Except for Ankleshwar, the state does not have any large tannery and the small tanneries of the state have not been developed. The neglect of this industry is surprising considering that leather and leather goods are the second largest item that India exports, next only to diamonds. In other parts of the country, large business houses are engaged in leather industry. A company like Larsen and Tubro,which manufactures heavy machinery, is now manufacturing shoes. This industry earns a lot of foreign exchange for the country.

After I joined the corporation, I started to think in this direction. Before I took charge, the corporation had initiated a project of tannery up-gradation. Under this project, the corporation had supplied huge drums to some of the leather units but I found that these were left unused. I made some of these drums operational and tried my best to modernize these units. During my tenure, I re-started the dysfunctional tannery at Kuha village. It started to manufacture good quality footwear and was able to sell them in the market. I also learnt that the tannery at Badarkhan had not started functioning in spite of its modern equipment and drum. I

sanctioned financial aid from the corporation and made the unit functional and then I got the industry minister Mr. Shashikant Lakhani to inaugurate the unit. I also introduced, for the first time in Gujarat, an insurance scheme for the workers engaged in this hazardous occupation.

At the request of Shashikant Lahkani, I visited the city of Ambur in Tamil Nadu to study the tannery industry. There were around 200 tanneries in that city and some of them had a turnover of more than Rs10 crores and were also exporting their goods abroad. I also found that many of the factories in this state were making leather garments. In all these factories I found a large number of women workers. I also visited the World Leather Fair at Chennai where companies had displayed their products of footwear, different kinds of leather, shoe soles, and so on, in large stalls. I found that some companies specialized only in making soles of the shoes and had a turnover of Rs2 crores. Yet Gujarat, which too has a great potential in the leather industry, has not succeeded in exploiting it. The government had established a large unit at Idar, spending lakhs of rupees, but for some reason it had not been made operational. I took a keen interest in this unit and called the minister to inaugurate the unit.

Sheepskin and the skin of goat are easily available in Gujarat and these can be used to make leather garments. I found that the Gujarat Sheep and Wool Corporation wanted to explore this possibility. It had asked for a copy of the project report from the Maharastra government, which expressed its inability to submit it in the stipulated time frame specified by the corporation and I was given this task. I prepared it in twenty days with the help of my staff. The minister was very happy with my report and we had three or four meetings to discuss its implementation. Around the same time I had also prepared a plan with an estimated cost of Rs5 crores for the small units. But soon I was transferred to the secretariat and made the deputy secretary, Energy and Petrochemical Division by virtue of being the director of the Integrated Rural Energy Programme (IREP).

48. Director/Deputy Secretary, IREP

I took over as the deputy secretary, Integrated Rural Energy Programme (IREP), in the Energy and Petrochemical Division located in Block 5 of the new secretariat. I was in charge of the project that looked into the development and dissemination of smokeless stoves, biogas, solar cookers and other non-conventional usage of energy. The IREP was directly under the Planning Commission and so my salary and other expenditure came from a special central government grant.

I have always been aware of the importance of finding non-conventional sources of energy. The traditional sources have now proved to be both expensive and highly pollutant. It has become imperative to develop an alternative source to check the menace of the growing level of pollution that is choking the world today. During my time, a windmill farm project was implemented. The government had announced a hefty incentive for the establishment of windmill farms. Many places in Saurastra like Jamnagar, Okha and Mandvi took advantage of this incentive, and even today these farms are functioning well. Some of the large companies too have invested crores of rupees in harnessing this source of energy. Though the initial expenses of the installation of windmills are high, because wind is used to produce energy, in the long run it proves to be economical. The windmills are also used for drawing water, using wind energy instead of electricity. Solar energy is another very important non-conventional source, and now even the ocean waves are harnessed to produce electricity. In fact, in France this has

already been implemented. In Gujarat, too, the government was seriously thinking of exploring this source. During my tenure, the central government minister, Mr. Krishnakumar, had visited Gujarat and I had accompanied him when he undertook an aerial survey of the coast of Porbander in a helicopter. A meeting was also held at Porbandar to discuss the feasibility of implementing such a plant. But for some reason it was abandoned. Perhaps the process was very expensive.

Many people now use solar cookers in their kitchen. Some institutions have also changed over to solar cooking. St. Ann's School in Kalol has installed solar cookers in the community kitchen where meals for the hostel students are cooked. What is of importance is that in just two years it is possible to recover the investment amount. Thereafter, there is no fuel cost and what is more it also saves trees from being felled.

When I was in this section, we had put before the Centre a proposal for installing gasifiers (the heat from the gas produced from burning wood is used to operate either a turbine or a machine to produce electricity) in Gujarat. The plan was to instal the largest gasifier in Asia at Kutch, where electricity would be produced from the gas produced by burning the branches of gando baval. A solar pond was constructed in Bhuj where the solar energy is used to heat the water of the pond. Many industries use this water for cleaning purposes. Among the other projects that were implemented during my tenure was the photovoltaic project where solar energy is used to produce electricity. This was implemented in a village in Anand taluka where today the entire village's electricity is supplied by the photovoltaic cells. Though the instalation is rather expensive, in the long run it proves to be cost-effective. In Gujarat most of these projects have been implemented successfully, and the state had bagged, in the first year, a total of five awards out of eight given by the central government for implementing projects using non-conventional sources of energy. In the second year too, Gujarat had won the award. I remember I had accompanied the chief minister Mr. Chhabildas Mehta to Delhi to receive the award from prime minister Mr. Narasimha Rao. During my tenure, a world energy conference was held in Delhi. Around twenty representatives from different countries attended this conference.

From Gujarat two representatives—Mr. Patil, of the Gujarat Energy Development Agency (GEDA), and I were sent. The vice president, Mr. K. R. Narayanan, inaugurated the conference. The chairman, Planning Commission, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, and the planning minister Mr. Giridhar Gomango, were also present. The senior officials in charge of the energy departments in different states of the country also attended the conference. It was a five-day seminar and four states presented papers. My paper was on the usage of non-conventional energy in Gujarat. I started my presentation in English by stating:

> The name of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, is famous world over. He gifted the world a rare and unforgettable gift of pursuing non-violent struggle at a time when the nations were involved in a violent nuclear warfare. I come from the land which is the birthplace of this great man.

There was a thunderous applause in the hall. I then proceeded to give an overview of the work done in Gujarat. Patil showed the details through a slide show. There were twenty foreign participants who also presented their papers. The conference was a gala affair. I remember our meals used to come from the Oberoi Hotel and once we also had dinner at the residence of the lieutenant governor of Delhi. Giridhar Gomango too had held a dinner party for the participants at Hotel Ashoka. Cultural functions were organized for us every evening, where many TV artistes participated.

It pains me deeply that the people of our country are still not fully aware of the importance of utilizing non-conventional sources of energy. They do not understand that this is the only way to arrest pollution. Many advanced nations have started to make use of non-conventional energy options, for example, in Israel it is mandatory to instal a solar water system in all the new houses. No housing plan is sanctioned without the provision of a solar water heater. When I built my house at Gandhinagar, though it is not mandatory here to instal a solar water system, I got one installed on the terrace. It takes care of our supply of hot water. I have also installed a photovoltaic power system. The batteries get charged

by the sunlight during day and at night they light our house. The light given out is the same as that from the tubelight. In Rajkot the traffic signals work on solar energy.

Another project which was implemented in Gujarat during my tenure was a plant that made briquettes out of waste matter. Mr. Krishnakumar, the central minister, had come to inaugurate the plant. These briquettes are used in place of coal as fuel and now some of the factories have also started using them. Biogas too is another very important non-conventional source of energy. It generates electricity and at the same time it can also be used as fuel to light the kitchen stove. A religious institution in Junagadh is using it for both the purposes. I remember in a village we had installed a biogas plant which supplied cooking gas to all the households. There are two major deterrents in this process: the initial expenses and the installation procedure. Most people want immediate financial benefits and do not want to look into the long-term advantages. Once I remember an officer pointing out the disadvantages of the solar hot water system, had said to me, 'Its installation cost is so prohibitive that I can pay my electricity bill from its interest. So why should I instal one?'

How does one change this kind of mind-set? The only way out is through government intervention. The government has not paid adequate attention to evolve non-conventional sources of energy. Take, for example, my case. I was given adequate staff but most of my staff had been assigned extra tasks. At the Centre there is a separate department for non-conventional energy and a separate minister is in charge of it. In Gujarat it is just the opposite. Here this department is considered to be a small section and has to handle all the work related to different sources. I drew the attention of the minister, Mr. Navinbhai Shastri, to this issue and he agreed to write to the chief secretary regarding division of the department into different units. At the end of a prolonged discussion and after I left the department, different energy sources were specified and these were placed under different ministers.

Once I had to attend the funeral ceremony for my aunt. I had submitted an application for casual leave in advance, on the day before I needed it. But my leave had not been sanctioned till the evening and I would have to leave the next morning. At around

ten-thirty the next day I rang up the PA of the secretary. He informed me that he had sent my leave application to the secretary for signing but it had not come back to him with the rest of the mail. I went to the secretariat and met the secretary. He asked me to first call on the revenue secretary and explain the need for land for a wind farm in detail and then I could leave for the ceremony. I went to the revenue secretary who called the deputy secretary and asked me to brief him. The latter was busy with some other work, so I had to wait. By this time it was afternoon and I had to cancel my visit to my aunt's house. Most officers in the government do not wait for their leave to be sanctioned—they leave after putting in the application. But I was so committed that I never went on leave without receiving the sanction. In fact, I have always given highest priority to my work and have ignored my private life and family in carrying out my duty. I always believed that one had to be totally loyal and committed to the job that brought one's daily bread.

According to the Election Commission's code of conduct, when the director of the Gujarat Energy Development Agency (GEDA)'s term ends, he is released from his duties. I was given charge of his duties. I went to Vadodara and took over as the director. But GEDA's chairman was not happy about it because he wanted one of his officers to hold this position. Until then this post had not been given to any officer of GEDA. The chairman rang up the chief secretary and after ten days, the post was given to an internal candidate.

There is another painful experience of my life which I shall talk of here because it reveals how insensitivity and a bureaucratic approach impeded the progress of my career. The Department of General Administration prepares a list of eligible officers to be nominated to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) cadre. I was contacted and told: 'We don't have your last three years' confidential reports, so please arrange to send them immediately.' According to the government resolution, the confidential report of every officer for the year ending on 31 March had to be written by the controlling officer by 20 June. It clearly states, 'no confidential report should remain pending in the Controlling Office.' Yet my confidential reports of the last three years were

pending. The government had introduced a self-appraisal form, which the subordinate officer had to fill in and hand it to the concerned officer. This helped the officer to know what work the candidate had done during the year. I too had filled up the forms regularly and had sent them to my superior. He should have written my confidential report and sent it to his superior for review. But in my case this had not happened and so I went to meet the concerned officers who should have written my confidential report. One of the officers was at Calcutta at that time, so I met his PA and arranged to send my self-appraisal form to him by post. I met the others and finally all the reports were sent to the General Administration Department. For about two to three years my name was in the list of 'Zone of Consideration'.

Once the name appears in the selection list it can be kept till a candidate reaches the age of 58. But when I became 54, my name was removed from the list. All the other mamlatdars from my batch of 1968 got nominated to the IAS cadre. In our batch there were only two officers from the scheduled caste. Out of these two one had retired and I did not get nominated. Hence no scheduled caste officer was nominated. I was very confident that I would be nominated to the IAS cadre, considering my ability and excellent work. So I could not accept this defeat. When I went to find out the reason, I was told: 'Only those candidates whose confidential report carrying the grade "very good" have been nominated. Your report carried only "good". So you were not nominated.' If the officer had not written my confidential report for three years how would he remember how I had performed? According to the description of the task carried out by me as written in the self-appraisal form it should have been 'outstanding' and yet they wrote only 'good'.

What could I do? What pained me most was there were so many undeserving candidates who were nominated and I was denied in spite of my hard work and excellent achievement. There was one officer who had failed to clear even the departmental examination and yet he was nominated. He also secured a government job after retirement. In another case there were a number of enquiries against the candidate, which the newspapers had also reported, and yet, he faced no problem in being

nominated. I realized there were two ways to show one's performance in a government job—one was to work hard and the second was to keep one's boss happy. The second way was as important as the first. I also came to know how people perfected the second method. I do not want to go into details about this factor here. I will write about it in the third part of my autobiography which I want to call *The Bitter Truth.* Impressed by my successful work in the energy and petrochemical department, the Planning Commission adviser, Mr. Chopra, wanted me to come to Delhi on deputation. But I was not keen to leave Gujarat and so I declined his offer.

Every year the chief secretary and the additional chief secretary attend the state planning meetings in Delhi. They usually ask some of their officers to come along to discuss with the adviser in Delhi. There were two groups in the energy and petrochemical department. The additional chief secretary of the department represented one group and I represented the other group. Both of us went to discuss with the adviser the projects of our respective groups. The first year the adviser discussed the projects with me and gave his approval. But the next year, he wanted the additional chief secretary to remain present. I explained to him that the additional chief secretary was discussing the projects of the other group. But he said that he would rather wait for him. The advisor waited for the additional chief secretary to finish his work and then called the development commissioner and the panchayat additional chief secretary and proceeded to discuss the projects. In the previous year the plans had been sanctioned just by discussing with me.

Under the Integrated Rural Energy Programme, I used to hold meetings of all the project managers. I also toured the area and guided them and supervised their work. Once a meeting between the project officers and the officials of GEDA was held at Vadodara's circuit house in the presence of the concerned minister. In my address I said:

> We worship Lord Hanuman and the sun and yet we are not aware of the use of their power. We recite the *Hanuman Chalisa,* offer oil and vermillion and fast on Saturdays to please Lord Hanuman, the son of the Wind

> God, and yet we are ignorant of the strength of the wind. We do not realize that with wind energy we can produce electricity and draw water from the well. In the same way we bow to the Sun God and propitiate him with mantras and yet we do not make use of the huge energy that it radiates. This energy can be harnessed to cook our food, heat water and produce electricity. The ancient sages who wrote the Vedas and gave us the mantras must have done so because they were aware of the utility of this energy. . . . We need to cultivate a scientific attitude. . . . and make best use of this natural energy. This is the only way to arrest pollution.

While I was in this department, I was often assigned work outside it. When the Legislative Assembly was in session, I had to look into the matter related to it. The project officer under me at the secretariat too was given additional work of budget and planning.After some time the staff in the department wanted the ex-cadre officers like me who were sent on deputation to be sent back to the parent department of the secretariat. The staff openly expressed their demand in the staff meetings in my presence. They wanted the deputy secretary from the IAS cadre to come in my place.

There was a resolution of the Department of General Administration that all the departments should have a certain percentage reserved for the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. I had a copy of the working of the GEDA and I found that they were not following the rules. Their argument was: in the case of scientists reservation could not be applied. But my argument was that the entire staff of GEDA did not consist only of scientists. I informed them that most of the staff was in the administration and here the percentage ratio should be maintained. I wrote many letters but it was of no use. I then submitted the file to the additional chief secretary. He became angry and asked why he had been given it. I told him that the director of GEDA was not implementing the percentage rule or maintaining the roster and I wanted to inform him of it. I then realized that no step would be taken. So I tried to draw it to the attention of the social welfare department.

While all this was going on, two important events occurred in my life. In October 1994 I founded the Dalit Sahitya Sabha in Gandhinagar. I invited dalit writers of Gandhinagar to the first meeting that was held at my house, where we honoured Dr. Mohan Parmar for getting a Ph.D. degree. Thereafter we started to meet regularly every month. Now we invite different speakers at these meetings and discuss the works of dalit writers and literature at length. The second event was the release of my first novel *Shool* in 1995. The book launch was organized by Granthratna and was held at Nadiad in May 1995. I had received some invitation cards for the event to distribute among my friends. While I was writing the names on the cards, my PA came to me and asked me who Kesharshivam was. I told him about my pen name, and explained, 'Keshar is my mother's name and Shiv is my father's name.' Many do not know this side of my personality. My neighbours have no idea who Kesharshivam is.

Soon I was transferred from the energy and petrochemical department. I was made the deputy development commissioner and transferred to the old secretariat. Mrs. Jayanti Ravi, an IAS officer, was given my post. I had to console myself thinking that even if I had not been nominated to the IAS cadre, at least I had the opportunity to work in that position for three years. How much one has to suffer to keep up one's morale!

49. Deputy Development Commissioner

As the deputy development commissioner, besides the responsibility of handling the training programmes of the panchayat employees, looking into the issue of encroachment of panchayat land, Sarvodaya projects, and so on, I was also given other development work. Sometimes I had to look after the delegates from other states who came either to study the working of the panchayat system, or to attend seminars.

Every district in Gujarat has a special land encroachment cell. The district development officer is usually so overburdened with work that he is not able to give much time to this problem. But the encroachment of land is a very important issue. As I have discussed throughout this book, powerful people in the villages grab government land worth crores illegally and use it for agricultural purposes. In the present set up of the administration the local sarpanchs are put in charge of this work. How can an ordinary sarpanch handle such an important problem? The election of many women sarpanchs has made it more difficult. When the bullies of the villages pay no heed to the male sarpanchs how can the women sarpanchs be expected to handle it? Once I went to train a batch of women sarpanchs. After my session a woman sarpanch approached me and said, 'Saheb, there is a major problem of alcoholism in my village. I want to free my village of this vice. I'll give you the name of the person responsible for encouraging this

vice. Please arrest him but nobody must know that I have given you the name.'

She then handed me a piece of paper bearing his name. I was impressed by her courage and wrote a story called 'A Woman Sarpanch', which was published in two magazines: *Panchayati Raj* and *Akhand Anand*. It was later translated in Oriya.

I found that the district level cells looking into the encroachment problem were ineffective. The staff members were busy manipulating their transfers.The first thing I did when I took charge was to call a meeting of all the officers of this cell. I also requested the development commissioner to attend the meeting, which he did, and gave some useful suggestions. Thereafter I followed it up by having a separate meeting with the officers where the problems were discussed at length. This proved to be useful. Some of the encroachers were asked to pay a fine and then the land was regularized in their names. As a result, the government earned some revenue. I had realized that it would be futile to evict the encroachers from the land because the panchayats had no means to protect these lands from being taken over again. Most of the time, the encroacher was the one who owned the adjacent land and how would I curb this natural human tendency? The correct way to deal with this problem would be to distribute the land among the needy. But this solution would never work because it would mean giving the land to the dalits. Sometimes to avoid such an action, the panchayats designated these lands as pastures. This vicious circle continues and the loser is the government.

The Sarvodaya Project had been discontinued by one of the former chief ministers. But there was political pressure on his successor, and so the project was once again implemented. The projects under this plan are handled by the government and its corporations. Such dual sharing of responsibility gave scope for corruption and misuse of government grants. During my investigation of some of the cases, I found that some centres had approved petrol bills for rented jeeps and motor bikes. At many places the projects used to be implemented in such a way that the Sarvodaya Ashram of a particular place benefited from it. I prepared a detailed report and sent it to the government with my recommendation of discontinuing the project. But it was not possible to do so because of political pressure.

During my tenure, a fresh batch of sarpanchs got elected. At the district panchayat too many new office bearers were elected. I arranged a training programme for the taluka-and district-level officials. This was the first time such a programme had been arranged. I formed a cluster of villages in some talukas and arranged for training programmes for the sarpanchs. In one of the meetings of the district development officers, Mr. P. K. Laheri, the principal secretary to the chief minister came on behalf of the chief minister. He was very impressed with this training programme and told me in the meeting, 'Jadav, if you can manage to get a film made on this training programme then I'll sanction a grant. I want you to show this film in every village.' But soon after this meeting I was transferred and I could not do it.

The training programmes are offered at different centres for the panchayat employees, but many districts and talukas in Saurastra do not have adequate staff to do routine work so they do not send anyone to these training programmes. The district development officers also confirmed that five to seven posts were vacant in the district panchayats. Under these circumstances, the existing staff had to bear the extra workload and so there was no possibility of sending anyone for training programmes. Once I received a phone call from the Sardar Patel State Administration Institute who complained that the panchayat staff did not attend the training programmes and I should ask the district development officers to send them. There were times when a lack of adequate number of participants forced the authorities to cancel training sessions.

The development commissioner's office on the other hand has surplus staff. Jealousy can be found everywhere. After attending a farewell function of a peon of this office, I wrote a story called 'A Farewell Function' which was published in *Jalaram Deep* and *Panchayati Raj*. I was aware that very few officers preferred the post of the deputy development commissioner. They tried their best to avoid being given this post and if they had to accept it, then they would manage to get a transfer soon. A dalit officer had held this post before me for a long time because of his dalit status. I too remained in this post for two years. If the cottage industry commissioner had not asked for my transfer, I too would have had to remain in this post till retirement. After I left, four officers

were transferred to this post in two years. The indifference shown to the dalit officials by the village panchayats is quite obvious and can be gauged very clearly when these officials are questioned. After the implementation of the revised rules, many dalits and women now hold these positions but it does not require much research to know under what circumstances they have to carry out their duties. The dalit sarpanchs have to bow down either to the talati, or other leaders of the village, or to the previous sarpanchs. The women sarpanchs are in a similar predicament. And if the woman happens to be a dalit, then her condition is all the more pitiable because who in the village will accept her in that position? I remember in a village in Banaskantha district, a dalit woman sarpanch had to put up with harassment from the villagers and from the talati. He was hell-bent on making things difficult. He had even locked up the panchayat office. Others too were plotting to remove her from the post. Finally, they succeeded.

Generally one expects such harassment at the village level. But the treatment meted out to a Class I dalit officer in the development commissioner's office was so shocking that it would put anyone to shame. This officer used to receive anonymous letters from an official under him. These letters were full of abuses and the derogatory word *dhhed* was used quite liberally. One day, the dalit officer came to me with the entire bunch. I went through all the letters. The language was not only offensive but also obscene. This officer suspected one of the officials under him, but how was he going to prove it? The letters were written in different handwritings and it was difficult to locate the place from where these letters had been posted. I asked him to complain to the development commissioner. When he went to the development commissioner he felt humiliated because till that time the commissioner too did not know that such language existed! Under what odds a dalit officer has to carry out his duty! He is totally crushed between the officials above and below him. I shudder to think the state of mind of this Class I officer. How painful the whole experience must have been for him!

During the 1996 Lok Sabha elections I was appointed an election observer. On 2 April 1996 I went to Delhi to attend a meeting of

the election observers. All the three election commissioners—Mr. T. N. Seshan, Mr. M. S. Gill and Mr. Krishnamurti—were present in this meeting. We were first briefed on our duty and then informed about our posting. Some of the officers who had come from Gujarat were placed in Assam, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. I was given the charge of Katihar in Bihar. The name reminded me of the Hindi movie *Kati Patang*. I humorously wondered whose kite would be cut! The name of course had a different origin. *Kati* in Sanskrit is waist and *har* is the ornament worn on the waist. The legend states that the places where the ornaments of Goddess Sati fell during the *tandava* dance became places of worship of the Goddess. In Gujarat, the temple of Goddess Butbhavani in Arnej village is so named because according to the legend Sati's earring, which in Gujarati is called *butti*, had fallen there. There is another place called Zhanzhri after her anklet which had fallen there. Our scriptures give equal significance to destruction and annihilation.

An acquaintance from Bihar, who was a government official in that state, when he came to know that I was going to Bihar as an election observer, briefed me about some of the MPs and MLAs, and the criminals of the state. Then he added: 'You must be very careful in what you do. In the last election the district magistrate of Gopalganj lost his life. Perhaps you know about it.' A senior IAS officer in Gandhinagar even joked, saying, 'Get only a one-way ticket. You won't have to spend on the return fare.'

Around this time I read in the *Times of India* about four murders in Katihar and how the people of that town had voluntarily observed four days' strike in protest. I also read the news of transfer of the chief of police and the collector of Katihar. Bihar was constantly in the news and all this worried my wife and children a great deal.

On 14 April 1996, the day of Dr. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, I took the 8 p.m. flight to Delhi. Next morning at 8 a.m. I boarded the Delhi-Patna flight. The plane took off in the sky as the soft rays of the early morning sun frolicked with the clouds. From the aircraft window the clouds appeared as piles of fluffy white cotton wool interspersed with black ones. Looking at these clouds I was suddenly reminded of the famous lines of Kalidasa's *Meghdoot*,

'*ashar eshya pratham divase*'–'on the first day of Ashar' (mid-June to mid-July, when the monsoon begins). At the same time another memory flashed in my mind–Champaran district of Bihar. This district is associated with Bihar's poverty. Though Katihar was very far from Champaran, I remembered how in 1917 Gandhiji had set his foot there along with Kasturba. They had visited the dalit habitation and witnessed the exploitation, poverty and suffering of the people. In one of the huts two women lived, but they could not come out together because they had only one sari between them. I was suddenly plummeted down to the earth!

At Patna airport the district education officer of Katihar came to receive me with a security guard. I went in their car to meet Mr. Pillai, the chief election officer of Bihar. From there we went to the circuit house and then we started towards our destination. Katihar lies on the border of Bihar and West Bengal, right across the other end of the state from Patna. I was informed that to reach one of the voting centres of this district we would have to cross three districts of Bihar and one of West Bengal. From that centre the border of Bangladesh was just 11 km. So to reach Katihar, I would have to cut across the entire state, passing through many districts. The driver of my car was Triloknath Jha but the district education officer Mr. Shailendra Kumar called him 'Chaiji'. The security guard's name was Lakhinder Paswan. As we were driving down the Patna-Guwahati National Highway, Shailendra Kumar pointed out a building as the prison house. His brother-in-law who had just retired had been posted as jailor there. He started to tell me some stories about the convicts of that jail. He said, 'Sir, in the earlier days sometimes some of the big criminals and dacoits were kept there. They would leave the prison at night, commit rape and murder and get back by five in the morning. But because they were in the prison they could not be accused of any of the crimes.'

I was reminded of the Hindi film *Andha Kanoon* where a similar incident had been portrayed. Some imprisoned dacoits escape during the night, commit murder and rape and come back before daybreak. Because they were legally in prison when they had committed these crimes, the court acquits them. I realized how a play or a film often mirrors life. After proceeding a little further, Shailendra Kumar told me that the next 20-km stretch was very

dangerous. It was risky to drive alone even in broad daylight; there were dacoits on the way who would often stop a car and ask for money. If anyone refused to pay the specified amount, they did not hesitate to kill. Just last year a Punjabi truck driver was stopped on the way. They demanded one hundred rupees from him. The driver gave a ten rupee note. They threw that note and demanded a hundred rupee note. The driver being a Punjabi was not going to give in so easily. He started to argue with them and suddenly somebody shot him. The driver, in spite of being hurt, drove the truck to a nearby police station. He then collapsed and died on the spot. Kumar said we were approaching the spot. Last year when he was travelling in a luxury bus, the driver waited for about eight to ten buses to arrive and then together they drove down this road.

I asked the driver to stop the car. It was eight in the evening and as there were no lights around it was pretty dark. The only light was the dim glow of the candles and oil lamps of the roadside tea stalls. I said that we had a security guard with us, so what was there to worry? Lakhinder asked pointedly that if twenty armed men were to attack us, what could he do alone? To the great surprise of my companions I laughed. They had expected me to be alarmed, especially because I was from Gujarat where I would not have encountered anything like this. But I said instead that we could have some tea at this stall and I got down from the car. Immediately the armed guard was beside me and he asked for a chair for me. When the tea stall owners saw that I was with an armed and uniformed guard they assumed that I was a big police official and each one of them came to me and saluted. Shailendra Kumar whispered in my ears, 'Sir, all these people are part of that gang.'

Meanwhile a car passed by. Immediately Shailendra Kumar said, 'That was Pappu Yadav's car. There were armed body guards inside.' Then he narrated many incidents relating to Pappu Yadav. I was familiar with this name, having read about him in the newspapers, and the official in Delhi too had talked about him. In a short while tea was brought, which tasted different. But then I was in a different state and everything was going to be different. After drinking the tea I returned to the car. The bodyguard closed the door and the driver started the car. The road was totally desolate

and frightening. For a second I felt as if I was on the bridge in Chambal area in Madhya Pradesh. It was in 1984 and at 1 a.m. I had to cross the bridge where there were armed police at the foot of the bridge. But on that frightening night I had crossed the bridge unharmed. Today too we drove down this 20-km stretch without encountering any mishap except a thrilling excitement within us. We talked throughout our journey and reached Katihar at eleven at night. When we reached the resthouse, the officials who had accompanied me heaved a sigh of relief. Shailendra Kumar commented that it was not safe to travel at night.

But in the days to come I toured the villages during the day and returned to the resthouse at night. Once, instead of returning at ten in the night I came back the next morning. I was caught in a storm and had to spend the night on the road. On my way back from a polling centre, I had suddenly found myself in the midst of a major storm followed by heavy rain. As we were driving in the rain I heard the loud sound of hail hitting the car. The road soon got covered with large hailstones which shone brightly in the light of the car's headlight. Huge trees on the roadside were being uprooted by the force of the storm and so I asked the driver to stop the car. We waited for the storm to subside when suddenly the driver started the car and drove it a little further on the road. When I looked back I saw a huge tree fall at the place where the car had stopped. It hit the boot of the car as it fell, just missing us by an inch. The driver said to me, 'I saw the tree bending and so I moved out of the place or it would have fallen on the car.'

I thanked the driver for his presence of mind that had saved us from being crushed under the tree. The wind hissed and the lightning flashed in the sky as we drove cautiously. We were moving so slowly that we could barely cover about five kilometres in seven hours, that is, from midnight to seven in the morning. The situation improved at around one o'clock at night, when the long distance buses plying to Guwahati, Patna and Haryana started arriving. Each bus had about twenty five to thirty passengers who got down and helped to move the trees from the road. Suddenly an ambulance arrived carrying a dead body and we had to make way for it to pass. The road was completely jammed and the traffic had come to a standstill. I did not have

an armed guard with me that night. The officer who had accompanied me said that now I would know how important it was to have an armed guard with us all the time.

Both the driver and the officer were very frightened and were praying fervently. If there had been no storm we would have reached the resthouse at Katihar by ten o'clock at night. Instead, we reached next day at ten in the morning. I have never been able to forget that night with the hissing wind, rain, upturned trees blocking the road, and the bus passengers who helped to move the trees from the road.

In Katihar I had a meeting with the collector, the DSP, the SDM, the additional collector and the local BDOs. Before coming to Katihar I had telephoned the collector, Mr. Mohanto, from Gandhinagar and discussed the arrangements for the elections. But when I came here I found that he had been transferred and Mr. Ramchandra Chaudhary had come in his place. Mr. Chaudhary came from Gopalganj where he had been placed after the death of the district magistrate during last year's election. He spoke of many incidents but there was an episode which I have not been able to forget even today. He said, 'At a voting centre an old woman had stamped the ballot paper five times. When I asked her the reason, she had replied: "This is the first time in my life I have been able to vote. So I have compensated for all the times that I had not voted."'

In Bihar and in some of the other backward areas it is still possible to find people who have never voted in their lives. I discussed at length with the officials about the arrangements for the elections, especially in the sensitive polling centres. We also looked into the issue of 'booth capturing' and deliberated the ways to arrest the attempts to stop the weaker section from casting their votes. We also discussed the number of police personnel to be deployed at different polling booths. At one point the collector said that he did not have sufficient forces. The situation was the same in other parts of Bihar. There were three of us who had been assigned the election duty of being observers in Bihar. Besides me there were Mr. Mathur, a senior IAS officer from Delhi, and Mr. Negi from Himachal Pradesh. Mr. Mathur had been an observer at Gopalganj last year, so he knew Mr. Chaudhary quite well. Mr. Negi was assigned the task of looking into the election expenses.

The list of sensitive polling stations in Katihar was a long one. I visited some of them.Though Katihar was the district headquarters, it did not have a good government resthouse. We were put up at the railways' resthouse. The place was infested with mosquitoes and the supply of electricity in Katihar was infrequent. It was very hot but fortunately because of the generator of the railways the resthouse's electricity supply was not affected and so lights and fans functioned. The resthouse had many sisam trees all around it; indeed, I found an abundance of sisam in rural Bihar. I had to make changes in my diet. In the Bihari diet chickpeas occupy an important place. Most dishes are made of roasted chickpea powder which they called sattu. When I visited the Manihari voting centre, I tasted a new sweet called raskadamb. Its round shape resembled the white kadamb flower. It had a syrupy substance in the middle and its outer surface was coated with poppy seeds and so it was called raskadamb. Katihar is the land of green expanses and the river. Along with the huge sisam trees, there was an abundance of teak and bamboo. I could not understand why this land where nature has showered such blessing should have such poverty. A special variety of paddy called *garmadhan* grew in plenty and farmers have earned a fortune cultivating it. But only the rich farmers and landlords have done so. I came to know that brahmins also tilled land here. They are known as Bhumihars and are all big landlords.

I inspected some of the polling stations of Manihari. The town is on the banks of Ganga and so the banks had to be patrolled all the time. The districts of Rajmahal and Sahebganj are located just across the river. I was told that dacoits from the neighbouring Bhagalpur district often disturbed the polling and stole ballot boxes. Some tribals lived in Manihari. I had imagined that the tribals here would be dressed in loincloth, with bows and arrows. But I was told, 'In the Santhal Parganas even now there are people who are totally naked!'

There were large boats to ferry people across the river to Sahebganj and Rajmahal. Shailendra Kumar informed me that the stones that were used to make concrete were procured from the opposite bank and were sought after. Every day each boat carried three trucks to the opposite shore where they were loaded with

stones and the same boat ferried them back. On some parts of the river bank I found people were growing vegetables, a practice that seemed to be common everywhere. Nearby there was a confluence of three rivers—Ganga, Mahananda and Koshi—and the force of the river current was tremendous. During the elections, the banks of the Ganga had to be patrolled constantly. Once some police personnel were trapped at the confluence and somehow saved from being drowned. But their Sten guns were carried away in the strong current of the river. I watched the patrolling on the opposite bank from a boat. We were in a large deep-water boat which got stuck when it reached the shallow water of the shore. With great effort it was taken out of the silt.

The BDO of Manihari, Mr. Surendrakumar Shukla, was from Uttar Pradesh. The sub divisional magistrate was Mr. Mohammad Suleiman who was an enthusiast for literature. He talked about *Akkarmasi*, the autobiography of the Marathi dalit Sharankumar Limbale. Sahitya Akademi had published its Hindi translation, which he had read. He told me, 'In this autobiography the author has described the intense hunger of the dalits. He has narrated how the dalits used to pick grains from dung of the cattle and cook them to fill their stomach.' I was reminded of Harima of our moholla who was thirsty but could not drink water because she was an untouchable and finally had drunk the urine of a cow.

I discussed with them the arrangement of the polling stations where dalit, tribal and other weaker sections were prevented from casting their votes. Here I visited a village which was called Narayanpur but the majority of the population were Muslims. The sarpanch too was a Muslim. I was taken to the moholla where Mushar dalits lived. I asked my companions, 'Why are they known as Mushar?'

'Because long back they used to survive only on rats.[1] The situation now is different.'

I spent some time with them trying to find out whether they were really being prevented from voting. But all of them denied being bullied. I went inside one of the huts. It was a small hovel and the only household goods I saw were a mud stove and few

1. Rats are *mushar* in Hindi

aluminium vessels. I also saw an empty oil bottle with its neck tied with a string. During the monsoon when they had to brave the rains the entire family would crouch inside, somehow squeezing in to sleep. If they had a goat or a hen, these too spent the night with the family inside the hut. I saw some pucca houses being constructed near these huts. The BDO said, 'The work of constructing fifty pucca houses for the dalits is in progress. We engage them in the construction of these houses and also build the houses with their share of the money. Some of the houses are ready for possession.'

I did see the construction of houses in progress. Perhaps a golden sun was about to rise for them. Of the three basic necessities—roti, clothes and house—they would at least have their own houses to live in. But clothes were still denied to them. I found women covering the upper part of the body only with the end of their sari. They just about managed to cover their breasts. I had seen some old women in such attire in the villages in Gujarat. I also saw how hunger and constant suckling of infants had shrunk the breasts of the young women. The breasts hung limply. I did not come across any *gajgamini* of Kalidas's imagination. On the contrary I felt that old age had set in untimely among these women. And yet they were often victims of rape, in unimaginable numbers! I asked, 'Why don't the women wear blouses? Is this their tradition?'

'They don't have money to buy cloth.'

I realized how prolonged lack of money turns compulsion into a tradition. Here the question of hunger had not been resolved because they had no means to earn their living, not even a piece of land. Yet they were surviving. They lived at the mercy of God. Looking at the culture and the religious beliefs of this place I saw that the entire nation, and not just Bihar, was surviving on God's mercy. That is why a Russian traveller had once told an Indian, 'In your country everything runs on the mercy of God.'

Here people are born, they grow up on their own, struggle to survive, and then one day die in the same impoverished state they were born in. When I was in school I had written in an essay: 'Farmers of this country are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt.' After independence it is not just the farmer, but most of the citizens are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt.

Shailendra Kumar had told me that when the harvest was ready, criminals came and plundered everything at gun point. Nobody dared open his mouth. I now understood the reason the poor denied any harassment at the time of voting. Then I went into the interior tribal area, and there too I got the same response. I was also struck by the strange paintings on the tribal houses. When I questioned them I was told that it was their custom.

I came to know only after coming to Katihar that Ahmedabad was not just a city in Gujarat but also a constituency in Kodha. Some of the polling stations of this constituency are situated on the banks of the Ganga and so the patrolling is done by boat. There is a Shiva temple on the opposite bank. Once some 500 pilgrims aboard a wheat-laden boat had died when the overloaded boat had capsized. Migratory birds from Siberia visited this place in winter and I got to see a few of them. I found the people in this part plaster the walls of their huts with the grey silt of the river. From far away this coat of silt looks like cement. In the rural areas the houses are made of thin bamboo strips which they coat with silt. The roof is either made of tiles or dry grass.

I went to survey the polling station in the Kodha area. The word 'Kodha' sounded like a Gujarati word because a village in Dholka taluka in Ahmedabad district goes by the name Kotha. There is a general belief that it is only in Bihar the power wielders prevent the weaker class from casting their vote. But that is not true; Mr. Navalbhai Shah, a former minister, had told me of a similar event in Kotha. Such 'sensitive' polling stations can be found in varying degrees in all parts of the country. I was amazed to know that the BDO of Kodha, Mr. Gopalkishan, had added *Paramhansa*, 'the enlightened one' as a suffix to his name. I told him, 'One can write *Paramhansa* only after attaining enlightenment, like, for example, Shri Ramakrishna.'

'Well I just like to add this word to my name. And anyway I'm going to retire from my job in a short time and then I'm going to devote myself to spiritualism.'

Gopalkishan was a youth and had a beard. He told me that after working for two years in the custom collector's office he had given in his resignation. But family responsibilities had forced him to take up a job again. This time he joined as a block development

officer. Now after two years he wanted to give up his job again. His mind was not on the job but he had the responsibility of a large family comprising a wife, a son, a daughter, parents, and an uncle and an aunt. He had no spiritual guide, and he knew no mantra, and yet he had the desire to attain enlightenment and become a Paramhansa. Was he tired of shouldering the heavy responsibility? But did he not think about his family before expressing his desire to quit? Or was his enlightenment of a different kind? Here there were many who were constantly battling with frightening and painful poverty, yet they had not become Paramhansas. Perhaps Gopalkishan was in search of such enlightenment!

I visited the flea market in Manihari, which was held every Thursday. It was something like the Sunday market on the banks of Sabarmati in Ahmedabad. People came here to buy their everyday necessities. I was told that people also bought bullocks and cows from this market and sold them in Bangladesh as a source of meat. When I thought of how in Gujarat cows often blocked the traffic and cause accidents on the roads and how in the name of 'mother cow' humans were sacrificed, I realized that such issues lost significance here where one was faced with stark hunger. Only those who have enough food in their stomach can carry out an agitation against cow slaughter. Here people had to manage to remain alive somehow.

I also visited many schools where some of the polling stations were located. In many of the schools there were no doors or windows and if there were some windows, these were broken. The floors were not plastered and had big depressions. I had seen similar schools in the villages of Gujarat. I wondered: were all primary schools in the villages in a similar state? In the aspirations for international airports, TV channels and computers, the importance of primary schools, the children studying in these schools and their teachers seem to have been forgotten. Everybody is interested in the fruits of the tree and nobody has the time to care for the roots. They forget that only if the roots are strong will the yield be good, which in turn would build a strong nation. I was startled to discover that in a classroom three people had set up their home with their belongings. They said that every day they shifted their belongings in the morning before the children came to school. At another polling station I found a teacher had turned the classroom into his residence. He

said every morning he pushed aside his goods and the class would commence and every evening after the children had left he would turn the classroom into his residence. Many school authorities ran the school in two or three shifts to earn money. So here too the classrooms were put to maximum use! When I visited these schools I was told that a sudden influx of teachers had made it difficult to provide proper accommodation and so the classrooms were being used as residences too.

Once on our way to a polling station in Maheshpura a kid goat came under the car of the BDO and died on the spot. It belonged to a Mashar woman. I saw the woman completely heartbroken, weeping copiously as if she had lost her child! On the same day I witnessed another accident—a collision between a passenger tempo and a bicycle with three riders. One person lost his life. The other two were seriously injured and were taken to hospital. Here too there were tears but they were tinged with anger. But in the case of the Mashar woman, she only had tears; she was denied the right to get angry.

Then we went to inspect the polling station of Barsoi. The name was difficult to remember. Paswan, the sub divisional magistrate of Barsoi, showed me an amusing way to memorize the name: 'Who cooks and feeds a child? Ba does the cooking which in Hindi is *rasoi* and so if you break the word then it reads *Ba . . . rasoi* and you will never forget it.' Afterwards, whenever I could not recall the name of this polling station, I would remember the phrase *Ba . . . rasoi*. The motor route was very long between Barsoi and Katihar because there was no bridge spanning the river flowing between the two towns. The train journey was shorter so I went by train to save time. The motor route passes through the districts of Purnia, Kishanganj and also through Dalkora in West Bengal. Once when I was in this area some Bengalis surrounded my car. They thought I was the election observer for West Bengal so they had come to me with their complaints. The same day the chief minister of West Bengal was also expected to tour the area. I did not know Bengali and they kept asking me questions in Bengali. I tried to explain several times in Hindi and English that I was not an election observer for West Bengal. Finally after a great deal of effort I succeeded in explaining who I was, and then they let me go.

The office of the SDM of Barsoi was in a railway storage room filled with tin sheets. I had a meeting with the staff there in that suffocating place and discussed the issue of management of sensitive polling centres. I was told that in the newly formed district, the collector's office was in a hostel of the Other Backward Class students. After the meeting, I went to supervise the polling stations and found most of the classrooms had been converted into polling stations. Some of the classrooms of the local schools were in a dilapidated condition and at several places the classes were held in makeshift sheds. Some of the schools were mud plastered bamboo structure with tin roofs. One such classroom was converted into living quarters for a teacher. I suddenly remembered Bihar's ancient university–Nalanda. How many foreign students seeking knowledge had come to that ancient seat of learning! How vibrant the educational activities had been then! Today only its land and its ruins remain. How the entire education system has changed! A friend among the officers had once spoken of something that had taken place recently in Nalanda. A private car that was hired by the travellers was once stopped by some goondas and the passengers were asked to cough up a large sum. When they refused to comply, the goondas forced the passengers to alight from the car and then set it on fire.

From Barsoi I took a train to Salmari. I discussed the polling arrangement with the deputy superintendent of police (DYSP) who informed me that two days ago two people had been murdered by the dacoits in broad daylight. The police had caught one of the dacoits in Bhagalpur district. He said that it was only because of the police's prompt and vigilant action that the culprit was caught. In Salmari I found the statues of Dr. Ambedkar and Mrs. Indira Gandhi installed at the crossroads.

Once in Katihar I saw a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) car pass by. I assumed that the CBI was there to investigate some routine case. Later, when on our journey to Patna, Shailendra Kumar pointed out a mansion of an accused in the case of misappropriation of funds in the animal husbandry department I understood why the CBI had come to Katihar. He said, 'Sir, can you see that mansion? Doesn't it look like a royal palace? It is built in such a way that a Maruti car can reach its first floor!'

In the villages of Katihar I saw a school building for the children of the cowherds. It was built without doors so that the children could study while grazing their cattle. Here I also inspected the polling stations situated in the schools run by the Ramakrishna Mission. There are no pucca roads in the rural areas in Katihar and so the collector had to procure 150 tractors and some trucks to transport the polling staff and polling material to various stations. In one case a tractor carrying the staff to Barsoi met with an accident and a constable was injured. He was admitted to a hospital in Purnea.

As an election observer I had to resolve many conflicts. Some of the queries and complaints came from the state-level political parties and the contestants. I would periodically fax a detailed report of the situation to the election commissioner in Delhi. Though there was news of trouble in many parts of Bihar, the election in Katihar was held peacefully. Only in two polling stations did we have to have re-polling and this was due to some error on the part of the officials. The staff who organize the elections are trained according to the rules set by the Election Commission. The presiding officers are given a handbook of rules written in their mother tongue. Then classes are conducted where the entire mechanism of elections is explained in detail. In spite of such precautions sometimes a staff member commits a serious mistake. At a polling station I asked a presiding officer to demonstrate the closure of a ballot box. He tried very hard but could not close the box. I then proceeded to show him how to close the box and then asked him to open it. He could not even open the box. I asked his polling officer to demonstrate it. He was intelligent and succeeded. Then I once again showed the presiding officer how to close, seal and open the box. I asked him if this was the first time he was on duty and was surprised to learn that he had done this three times earlier. So I asked him, 'Then why can't you close and open the ballot box? How did you manage at other times?'

He was silent for sometime and then answered: 'My polling officer knew how to do it.'

During the elections there were no incidents of any violence, booth capturing, or complaint of anyone being prevented from casting his or her vote. Many political big wigs like chief minister

Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav, the former home minister, Mr. Mukti Mohammad, and others came to Katihar for campaigning. Mr. Mukti Mohammad was provided with centre-level security. After the entire drum beating of election campaigning, the Congress Party candidate Mr. Tariq Anwar won the seat. This was the only seat in Bihar that the Congress Party could win. The belief that administration always reverts to illegal means was proved wrong in Katihar.

The counting hall was fenced up with a low brick wall in such a way that the political agents and contestants could see the counting of ballot papers from outside this barricade. It was very hot inside the hall. I was told that in an earlier election about five people had fainted when the counting of votes was going on. But this time everything went off smoothly, except that the counting took a long time. Around midnight I saw that the security personnel were slowly leaving the place. I immediately drew the attention of the collector and the DSP. The DSP at once alerted the police force. As a result the counting was not disrupted with any untoward incident or violence. When everything was over I felt that often the tales of Bihar election scenario are grossly exaggerated!

Katihar has a large population of refugees from Bangladesh. Some of the villages in Barsoi area have a population that is100 per cent Muslim. Moreover, because this area is on the border of West Bengal, there is a strong presence of the communists. The Bihar district of Kishanganj is carved out of Purnea district and it shares its border with Nepal. During this election the district magistrate of Kishanganj had sealed the border on Nepal side. He had also sealed the border on West Bengal side.

There is a Kali Temple in the Bengali neighbourhood of Katihar. I came to know that like the Kali Temple in Calcutta, here too every week two or three goats were sacrificed. When I visited the temple I saw the place where the sacrifice was carried out. I saw patches of dry goat blood on the floor. Shailendra Kumar said that he thought a goat had been sacrificed yesterday. How many humans are sacrificed to propitiate the Goddess Election! And it is only the meek who are sacrificed because as I have mentioned earlier, I have never heard of a lion being sacrificed anywhere. We all follow the

ritual of offering a coconut in the holy fire. This coconut is nothing but a symbolic non-violent sacrifice which became prevalent in our country thanks to the preaching of non-violence by Mahavira and the Buddha. But we banished Lord Buddha from our land and despatched him to foreign lands. In fact, we have despatched many things from our country today. Many of our energetic, intelligent, scientific minded youths are being lured away to foreign lands. It is a large scale brain drain! At the same time there are ministers whose money are also despatched to the foreign banks! And these are the people who run the country today!

I found the omnipresent Gujaratis even in Katihar. I had a strong desire to meet them but I decided against it. Twice I was subjected to the question of my caste by the collector of Katihar. Wherever I go I have to face this question. In Gujarat, whether travelling in a train or a bus after the initial conversation the question is, 'Which caste do you belong to?' I was sure that had I met the Gujaratis of Katihar I would face the same question.

I returned to Gandhinagar once the election was over. When I reported to my office, the development commissioner asked me why I took so long to return. I told him that I had left immediately after the elections, whereas the others were still at the Patna circuit house waiting for the confirmation of their plane tickets. It saddened me to think that in spite of my being a senior Class I officer, I had to give an explanation for the delay like an ordinary clerk.

There was a seminar on Panchayati Raj and Social Justice at Hyderabad, 13-15 November 1996. It was going to be held at the National Rural Development Institute. I was asked to attend this seminar in the last minute. The twelfth was the Gujarati New Year's Day and I had to catch the 2.25 pm flight from Ahmedabad airport. I had called the car at 12.30 at night but it had not come. The same evening we had heard on the 8.30 news on TV about mid-air collision of two aircrafts in Haryana. We later came to know that only three passengers had survived the crash initially but had died on the way to hospital. It was quite natural that my family was worried about my late night flight. Since the car which was going to take me to the airport had not come, my son tried to persuade me to cancel the trip. Perhaps he took the non-arrival of

the car to be a divine indication. He thought perhaps it was all for the best and so the car had not come! But I was determined to go to Hyderabad. I had already made an alternative arrangement with another officer's car. I left in the other car at one o'clock and the car sped on, piercing the dense darkness of the night, and I reached the airport. I first went to the domestic airport but it was completely dark inside. From there I went to the international airport, showed my ticket, went through the security check, and boarded the flight. The plane took off exactly at 2.25 a.m. Though technically, it was the 'morning' of the thirteenth, it was dark outside and I was travelling through this darkness. It was the night after the new moon so I was flying towards Hyderabad through the darkness as if I was passing through the dark clouds of the middle ages.Though we have attempted to leap into a brighter twenty-first century we allow our children to become victims of blind faith. Half a century has passed since independence, and yet we have to hold seminars on social justice! And a dalit woman is paraded naked in the village!

The main focus of the seminar was on social and economic justice and emancipation and empowerment of women. But several other related issues were also brought within its purview. Views on land reform were expressed. Along with the issues of social movement and social change, the literacy campaign in the states of Kanataka, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab were also covered in the discussion. The views were expressed on state-controlled economy, privatization, public institutions and the dalit movement. The question of huge expenditures on these projects also was brought out in the seminar. The views on political justice of Socrates and Plato were also expressed. Mr. S. K. Shastri in his paper highlighted the need for the effective abolition of untouchability, total curb on atrocities on the people of the scheduled castes and tribes, emancipation and rehabilitation of the scavengers, economic and educational development of these backward classes, and so on.

There was a discussion on the question of empowerment and political, social and economic freedom. Issues of decentralization, Panchayati Raj and the ultimate achievement of the world—democracy—were also the topics of discussion. It was also brought

out how the political parties were developing their cadres under the guise of Panchayati Raj. It was pointed out to the participants how caste consciousness had entered the political parties. While some pointed to the rot that had set in the bureaucracy and police force, others spoke about the indifference towards rural development projects, the collector's power, and the indifference shown towards the representatives of the district collector's office, local officials and ordinary citizens.

Somebody cited the example how local district officials had no information about the advent of a cyclone in Andhra Pradesh. An article by Mr. Mani Shankar Ayyar that had appeared in the *Indian Express* was quoted and the question was raised about the future of these local organizations. Everybody agreed that only a good sarpanch can stop political intervention in the functioning of village administration. He has the power to restrain even a minister but the reality is very different. The ignorance of the sarpanchs, their lack of education, blind faith and the need to sensitize them to caste-related issues were also brought out. The precarious position of dalit civil servants was highlighted. Examples were cited where an officer in spite of being a dalit hesitated to take a fair view in a case where another dalit was involved because of the fear of being accused of being partial. Economic justice in today's context meant that only if a person was wealthy or was a minister he was not questioned on his caste and hence faced no discrimination. The meaning of such terms as commitment, lip sympathy, crocodile tears were also examined. Gandhi's 'change of heart' and the individual approach to the age-old problem of untouchability were also looked into.

One of the participants, Prasanna Kumar—a government official—presented a paper on the atrocities committed on the dalits in Andhra Pradesh in the years 1980, 1983, 1985 and 1991. He quoted Article 17 of the Constitution and talked about the Preventive Acts of 1955 and 1989 and other amendments. He cited the examples of the carnage at Padrikuppam, Karamchedu and Chundur and criticized the role played by the bureaucracy and the police in these events. He stated, 'Though the Indian judiciary is praised world over, its passivity in these events speak of its indifference and carelessness.' He also provided other proofs in

support of his observation. He ended the paper with a set of recommendation that needed to be implemented to avert such situations. These were: *(i)* the decision in such cases should be prompt and the punishment also should be quick; *(ii)* the punishments meted out need to be increased to a minimum period of five years; *(iii)* the persons found guilty of neglect in such cases should be debarred from standing in both municipal and state-level elections for a minimum period of seven years; *(iv)* Article 311 should be implemented wherein a person found guilty is dismissed on the ground of negligence; *(v)* the victim should be given free legal aid; *(iv)* the victim should be paid his daily wages for the days he has to appear in the court; and *(vii)* the government should have the provision of dismissal on the ground of wilful negligence for such crimes.

In support of the last recommendation he gave the example of a car accident case. Under the Motor Vehicle Act if there is an accident, the person has to be compensated without looking into the reasons. In the same way if there is a theft in an appartment house the first step taken is dismissal of the watchman. He was emphatic that the massacre at Chundur could have been averted but for the wilful negligence on the part of the authorities. There is a general belief that human nature cannot be predicted but can we use this excuse to cover up six cases of atrocities in one year in Bihar's Bhojpur area and the lynching of eighteen dalits in Bathani Tola? In the case of natural calamities like floods, a collector can be easily suspended but when atrocities are inflicted on dalits such steps are never taken against any collector. It was pointed that sometimes when a collector is willing to do what is required he is thwarted because he cannot ignore the pressure from his bosses. Everybody agreed that Gandhi's promise of a 'change of heart' has not happened. There are no visible rays of hope.

Another impressive speaker at the seminar was a senior professor from Osmania University in Hyderabad: Dr. Y. B. Abba Sayalu. Dr. Sayalu's Ph.D. thesis was on the tribal population of India. He is now preparing an area report of the tribal population of 57 districts and sometime back he had visited South Gujarat in this context. Many people believe that the dalit officers are not efficient in their work. He had carried out a study where he had circulated

a questionnaire assessing merit to twenty IAS officers: ten from scheduled caste and scheduled tribes, and ten from the regular category. His surveyed proved that the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe officers were equally efficient. He has brought out a thirty-page booklet giving this data. He pointed out at the seminar how it was difficult for a dalit to get rented accommodation irrespective of his position and financial soundness. He is subjected to irrelevant questions and it is made out as if only the dalits eat non-vegetarian food! And during the elections he is debarred from visiting the dalit moholla. When a dalit boy wears shoes and tucks in his shirt he has to face the question from the teacher, 'Have you been upgraded to a higher caste?' He said that in the training of the civil servants, it is imperative to sensitize them about social justice and inculcate in them a positive attitude and a sense of commitment. At present only dalits read books of Dr. Ambedkar, but these books need to be introduced in the curriculum and in the libraries. At this point, somebody even raised the question of initiating a 'second freedom struggle'. It was also debated how much the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe ministers could contribute to resolving these issues. The question of political will came up in the discussion. Many pointed out that though there was no mention of caste in the Constitution, caste and sub-caste divisions have now come to be associated as part of the developmental process. As a result there is a growing hierarchy and jealousy among the dalits and certain factors take advantage of this and try to ignite the fire of division. In fact, the emancipation of dalits has now become a fashionable topic of discussion and political parties use it for their vote bank.

There was an extensive discussion on how long should the provisions of the reservation quotas continue. Some suggested this should be for at least for two generations, whereas others were of the opinion it should continue for three generations. In this context many shared their personal experiences.

Mr. Thirupi Annamalai, an additional collector from Kanyakumari, said, 'I was made the additional collector after a long time. My two brothers are coolies and my sister is a labourer. The condition of their families is not better than that of ordinary dalits. I am the only person in the family who is well placed and

this does not mean that all the family members have improved their standard of living. When a scheduled caste person gets a good job other family members expect a lot from him. I feel the reservation should continue for two generations to become effective.'

Then Mr. Chakravarthi, an officer at the National Institute of Rural Development, expressed his painful experience as a young boy in his village in Andhra Pradesh: 'I'm a dalit and so I know the pain of being a dalit. Even after I graduated no barber in the village was willing to cut my hair. When I went to the barber's shop a great deal of hue and cry was created. The barber refused to cut my hair. I lodged a complaint with the police. The barber then stopped cutting hair of everybody in the village. He said, 'First teach that dalit boy a lesson.' The villagers were first angry with me and my family, and then with the entire dalit moholla. The entire dalit moholla—men, women and children—came to my house and tried to persuade me to refrain from indulging in any such activities. I was a graduate and yet I had to listen to the illiterate and ignorant villagers and the moholla residents. They all shunned me and the situation became so bad that I was forced to leave the village. After this incident I studied hard and acquired many degrees. Today I have a Ph.D in economics and thanks to Dr. Ambedkar I have a job here.'

He said all this without any feeling of being ashamed of his status or of embarrassment and did not falter. I was spellbound. The words seemed to come from his heart and they touched me deeply. There was another reason why he had been able to make such an impact on me. In my novel *Mool ane Dhool* (Roots and Dust) the main character is an unemployed youth. Once when he accidentally touches the village priest, the priest has to undergo a purification ritual. An argument ensues between the two which leads to a major scuffle and fisticuffs. The boy is hurt in this quarrel and has to be hospitalized. A complaint is lodged with the police. The novel brings out how a dalit boy who has a graduate degree is shunned both by the villagers and the people of his moholla. When Mr. Chakravarthi was narrating his experience, I felt as if Magan, the hero of my novel *Mool ane Dhool*, was expressing his pain. I realized that Magan exists not just in Gujarat but in many parts of the country and even today his screams can be heard.

The third person who spoke at this seminar was Mr. P. Narsiha. He was associate professor and head of the Department of Public Administration at Dr. Ambedkar Open University in Hyderabad. He said, 'My son studies in the tenth standard. I have not indicated his caste in his school. I have admitted both my children to a good public school and I pay very high fees for them. I want my children to be free of caste and yet one day my son asked me: "Papa, what is our caste?" I was taken aback. I asked him, "Why do you want to know?" He replied, "My teacher wants to know, and he has asked me to find out from you." I try to protect my children from the poison of caste consciousness and yet they cannot escape from it.'

Dr. Narsiha's words struck a chord in my heart. I recalled

Dr. Abba Sayalu's words: 'Nobody wants to give dalits a house on rent.'

After the session I went up to Dr. Sayalu. I wanted to know the truth because sometimes people exaggerate things. I asked him, 'You said that in Hyderabad nobody wants to give a house on rent to a dalit, I want to know who was denied.'

He answered, 'I was denied.'

Mr. V. Prasannakumar, the deputy registrar of the Central University in Hyderabad, had overheard our conversation. He came up to us and said, 'When I had come to Hyderabad, I too could not get a house.'

I recalled the first chapter of my novel, *Shool*. Here, when a magistrate is not able to get a house on rent he decides to buy one. Initially a person agrees to sell him the house but when he comes to know his caste, he declines. He then sells this house to a caste person who is a clerk in the court. The magistrate is stunned at this news, and when he returns home his son says that his classmates have asked if he is 'backward'. The magistrate replies: 'No, beta, we are not backward, we belong to the creamy layer, at the top of society!' I have spoken of this in an earlier part of the book.

Dr. Ambedkar had said, 'acquire education'. But how does one express the pain of this educated 'creamy layer' of dalits? I realized that my characters from *Shool* are not just confined to Gujarat; they exist in every corner of the country. I stumble upon this truth wherever I go.

Dr. Abba Sayalu, Dr. P. Narsiha and I visited Osmania University where we had a discussion on two prominent Telegu dalit writers—Katti Padmarao and Boi Bimanna. We also talked about the state of dalit literature and I told them about *Shool*, especially the first chapter. Dr. Narsiha said, 'Why don't you get it translated into English and send it to us? If you can't get it done, then send the original. We'll get it translated in one of the institutes here.'

While driving down to Osmania University, I saw a large statue of Dr. Ambedkar at a crossroads. Perhaps, today the maximum number of statues are of Dr. Ambedkar. Sometime back I went to Siliguri, and there too, I came across his large green coloured statue. I have seen his statue in far away tiny Salamari, a village in Bihar. And in Ambur, about 200 km from Chennai, I was wonderstruck when I saw two statues of Dr. Ambedkar right at the entry point on the two roads leading to the village. I found that two iron ladders were attached to the statues, so that anybody could garland them at any time. When I was visiting the place I had found fresh garlands around his neck and it was not his birthday. I remember I had visited the tanneries of Ambur. There were around 200 tanneries and the workers were all Muslims. These plants used special imported chemicals and as a result there was no foul smell which is usually associated with tanneries. I was told that crores of rupees worth of leather is exported from these plants. It pained me to see that the dalits had been deprived of their forefather's occupation.

On the third day of the seminar the topic of discussion was 'empowerment of women'. Dr. Y. Saraswathi, a retired professor of Osmania University said in her address that even today a woman is not allowed to travel alone. Sometimes a much younger male escort is asked to accompany her. She also discussed the social, educational and economic environment issues related to women. She pointed out that sometimes in the rural areas a woman, in spite of being less educated, earns more than her counter part in the urban areas. She stressed that the old customs and beliefs are still prevalent and as a result a woman is treated as a second-grade citizen. Though the Constitution has given her equal rights, when any major political decisions are taken, Dr. Saraswathi pointed out, she is hardly ever consulted and the issue of 33 per cent

reservation of seats in the Parliament does not even get a mention in the list of pending decisions. According to her, in the case of men, the reservation criterion gets implemented faster and the quota exists for males in such jobs as sweeper, coolie, clerk, and so on. The woman on the other hand has to work her way up on her own merit and today she is found in all kinds of professions.

She said that there are women who are auto rickshaw drivers and they carry out their job with full confidence. And yet, according to her, when it comes to electing a candidate for the post of a general secretary in the student group election in colleges a male candidate is preferred. A woman can get elected only as a 'ladies representative' where she has to look into problems related to her gender. She is never given a responsible position in any public work. According to Dr. Saraswathi, though after the implementation of the Sixth Plan, women are made cabinet ministers, they are given low priority portfolios like child development and the development of women. A woman officer is expected to excel at the workplace as well as at home. She is expected to do the household chores after a strenuous time at the workplace. She has no respite from housework even on a holiday. She said in the case of a man, the amount of dowry depends on the level of his education and his position in the society, whereas a woman has no such advantage.

She appealed to the women participants to raise their voice in protest and demand their rights as human beings. She reiterated that injustice is meted out to women at every level. At the time of elections, the campaigners never approach women voters. They merely tell their husbands, 'Ask your wife to vote for me.' Though during freedom struggle women had contributed as much as men to free India, today they are paid lower wages than their male counterpart. If the male worker is paid Rs. 25, the female worker is paid Rs. 20.

There was a long debate on the rights of women, especially in the light of the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. According to the new rules many women have become sarpanchs in the villages but the actual power is wielded by their husbands. Some even observed that there were cases where a husband had accompanied the woman official to a training programme. In such

cases the woman's role gets limited to putting her signature on papers. And when a woman sarpanch tries to establish her identity, she is prevented by society, her own family and her husband. But it was also brought out in the conference that now there was a new awakening among them.

Dr. Ambedkar wanted to introduce the Hindu Code Bill in order to improve the plight of the women and also to empower them, but unfortunately he could not do so. This Hindu Bill was divided into four parts and gradually over the years each part has been introduced as law. The mind-set of the people of this country has been shaped mainly by the code of Manu. The *Manusmriti* contains many derogatory remarks about dalits and women. And however progressive the men and women appear today, they are still imprisoned in their age-old religious beliefs. A dark curtain of the values inherited from the middle ages encircles them.

In this context I want to cite an incident that took place in Madhya Pradesh. I was stunned to read the details of this case. The incident had been reported on 30 November 1995 in the *Pioneer* and on 1 January 1996 in *Dainik Bhaskar*. Both the new-papers reported how on 19 November 1995 Draupadibai, a panchayat member of Salhena village, had been paraded naked in front of the block development officer. The attempt to disrobe Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is a tale we have heard from our childhood. Perhaps we have not made any progress since then. Or perhaps we are regressing from the middle ages to a dark age. Even today there are incidents of sati and those guilty of committing such crimes get acquitted in the court. Perhaps Dr. Ambedkar has to take birth again!

On 17 November 1996 I took the evening flight from Hyderabad and reached Ahmedabad at 10.40 at night and immediately left for Gandhinagar.In darkness I had left home and in darkness I returned.

50. Joint Director

The cottage industry commissioner wanted me to join his office as a joint director. I also wanted an exposure in a new department and so I accepted his offer. He wrote to the administration and in a short time I was transferred to this post. In this department I had a staff of around 1200 district- and state-levels employees. I was in charge of their transfer, promotion and other related work. The department has many training centres that offer vocational training programmes, and it was my task to look into the workings of these centres. I was in charge of the loans for setting up small scale units, and of the disbursement of grants to subordinate corporations and boards. As a result I had to work closely with the banks. The sericulture unit was a new experience for me and there was a subsidy scheme for silkworm culture and cultivation of mulberry plants. I attended a meeting on sericulture development in Delhi where representatives from other countries were also present and there were extensive discussions about various processes from nurturing of silkworms to production of silk. One of my predecessors had been sent for training to China for six months. But on his return he was transferred to another department, and thus his training was wasted. Another officer, I remember, had been similarly sent abroad to learn about rural

development. But when he returned, he was also transferred to another post. Training programmes abroad are a good excuse to get a paid holiday in a foreign land. Of course, one cannot deny the resultant gain in knowledge and the broadening of perspective through interaction with other nationalities. I was never lucky enough to get this opportunity. Whenever an opportunity came, some other officer was sent in my place.

By this time I had written my autobiography, *Purnasatya,* and given it to Dr. Keshubhai Desai to read and he suggested that I should write a novel based on it. I had started doing so when I was the deputy development commissioner, and had completed three chapters. But my post at the cottage industry department was very demanding. Every evening I carried home four to six bundles of files and worked till two to three in the morning. I diligently followed the routine of clearing all papers the same day so that they could be despatched the next morning. As a result my subordinates also learnt to clear the files quickly. The moment I received a file, I would read from first to last pages to ensure that my subordinates were not trying to fool me. I had prepared a leave sanction note with columns indicating the name of the employee, his designation, and type of leave, duration of leave, his leave balance and the reason for leave. I got photocopies made of this form. This way I was able to save time as I had the necessary information at one place. Once a leave sanction file of an employee came to me for signature. The file had travelled from the clerk to his boss and from there to the section head who was a Class II officer. From him it had gone to the Class I officer and then it had come to me. I saw that it had all the signatures of the supervisors/officers and all the columns had been filled except the one where the name of the employee had to be written. I sent back the file with a note 'whose leave has to be sanctioned?' Then everybody in the office realized their mistake. I called the concerned employee and asked him to be careful in future. He said that because there was so much work he had no time to check things. Then he added, 'Saheb, my superior must also be vigilant. Does the government give him salary to just put his signature?' I knew that he was only taking out his frustration because he had been reprimanded by my junior.

Once I visited the Training Centre in Vadodara. There I told a Class II officer, 'Good work will fetch you good confidential report.'

He replied, 'Sir, I do put in good work, and even if I have a good confidential report, what will be the outcome? I am not going to get a promotion.' He hesitated and then gave an example of another officer, saying, 'Sir, both of us had joined the service together. Today he is a joint commissioner, whereas I'm only a Class II officer.'

Such anomalies exist in the government administration. In some departments the promotions are fast whereas in some departments it is a very slow process. Take my example. At present I am an officer of the Gujarat Administrative Services. When I was in the Raj Bhavan, I was a Class I officer at par with the rank of a deputy collector. At that time Mr. Gangasinh Parmar was in the secretariat cadre and was working as section officer in the Raj Bhavan in the rank of a Class II officer. In the secretariat the promotions are fast and so by the time I became an additional collector from deputy collector, Mr. Parmar had moved to the post of undersecretary, deputy secretary, joint secretary and finally special secretary. In certain cadres barely one promotion is given whereas in some cadres four promotions are possible. In the same government organization such anomalies take place!

Once when I was visiting a district industry office, a meeting for sanctioning a loan for setting up a business was in progress. The committee comprised the bank manager, other officials and the district industry officer. They had short-listed some 25 applications and were now taking the interview of the applicants. I found that of the 25 applicants one was a dalit and another tribal candidate. I watched the interview process and found that the dalit applicant was sanctioned loan after he was subjected to a lot of questioning. Perhaps they had sanctioned the loan because I was present! The tribal candidate's loan application was rejected. I quietly watched the interview process. The tribal candidate had asked for a loan of Rs. 10,000. He had studied up to matriculation and had pledged his brother's two bighas of land for getting a loan. He had already spent Rs. 1000 to build a wooden cabin for his shop and yet his application was rejected. When I asked the bank manager for the reason of rejection he said,

'Sir, these people take the loan and never repay.'

I argued, 'Some managers reject applications where the candidate is not able to pledge anything. In this case he has pledge two bighas

of land and he has already spent Rs. 1000 to build a cabin for his shop. So he is serious about starting a shop. Moreover, the place where he proposes to start his shop is a promising area.'

The manager argued for a long time and then finally I had to tell him, 'I know that in your area a cement factory worth crores of rupees has been set up with loan and subsidy given by the government and it has not started functioning as yet. This tribal candidate has asked for a loan of only Rs. 10,000. If you threaten him even once, he will pay back your loan amount selling his land. These people are at present poor and meek but if you do not give them opportunity to eke out a living, then one day these same people driven by their hunger will drag you out by your white collar and tear you apart publicly.'

It was only when the manager of the district industry centre intervened that the loan was sanctioned. Another time I was in Delhi to attend a meeting of the heads of all the nationalized banks of the country. The joint secretary of the central government was also in the meeting. I raised the issue of the difficulty faced by the candidates belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes in getting loans from the bank. In response I was told that 'there was no reservation here'. I had only suggested cultivating a positive approach towards the weaker section of the society and earmarking a certain amount for them so that it can be used for the development of these people. I had pointed out that usually their applications were rejected on the ground of the proposal being not viable, there was no property that could be pledged, they did not own any land, they were not in a position to repay loan amount, and so on. I had felt that as a government officer it was my duty to draw attention to the actions that nullified the good intentions of the government. I knew my limitations and yet I could not remain silent when faced by this kind of situations. I have often taken great risks and have had to tolerate a great deal in my career and life.

From the time I reported for duty as a joint director, an employees' union started a jihad against me. They raised a technical issue against me. They said the post of the joint director of the cottage industry should be filled up by an officer from a cooperation department. The person from whom I had taken over the charge had also been an ex-cadre officer and yet there had been

no strong objection against him. The union finally appealed to the high court. It was election time, and the rules of the elections did not permit a transfer. But they approached the Election Commission and managed to get its approval and got me transferred from there. I was then made the executive director of the Tribal Development Corporation.

51. Executive Director

As an executive director in the Gujarat Tribal Development Corporation, I had to handle the development projects of the scheduled tribes. Earlier, when I had requested for the post of the project administrator in the tribal areas, my request had been rejected. I had even asked for the post of the secretary at the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi when it fell vacant, but there too my request was not considered. Generally, nobody in my cadre would welcome such a posting, but because I was interested in literature, I had asked to be placed there. There is a saying in Gujarati: 'if you don't ask even Mother will not serve you.' But in my case in spite of my asking the government would not oblige me.

I could spend very little time in this office. Meanwhile the code of conduct for the elections was implemented, but even so I took a deep interest in the projects initiated for this group. I was able to get more grants from the centre for these people. Most bank officials believe that the tribals do not pay back the loan. In April 1998, I took up the work of loan recovery on a war footing. Without bringing any pressure on anyone I was able to collect a hefty sum of rupees: one crore and fourteen lakhs in one month. This recovery was a landmark in the history of the corporation. Since its inception the corporation had not collected such a huge

amount in a month's time. The secretariat was also surprised at my achievement. I was able to prove the bank officials wrong.

Around this time a function was organized for the distribution of bicycles by the chief minister to the tribal girls. He was also going to distribute the cheques of the loan. I had the recovery cheques with me and I wanted to hand over these cheques to the chief minister at this function. I wanted to show that the tribal population was capable of repaying the loan on time. But my request was not granted. The tribals are a proud race and they would never take anything that did not rightfully belonged to them. But this population has been now made dependent. Often in the name of loan and mortgage a large portion of this population has sunk in debt. Most tribals lack basic education and there is very little technical education among them. The reserved seats for them in technical colleges remain vacant. Many years back I had suggested to a well-known tribal minister, 'We need to set up a separate tribal technical education board for the entire stretch of the tribal belt extending from Dang and Ahwa to Sabarkantha and Banaskantha. Only then they would be able to avail technical training and this would in turn open up job opportunities for them. Otherwise in a few years all the doors of job opportunities will be closed to them.'

It is a vicious circle. The reserved seats are not filled up, and so technically trained candidates from this group are not found and now under the excuse of budget cuts the posts are not filled up. If only they could be given some amount of technical knowledge, they would be able to start a small unit in their own area. I have moved around extensively in the tribal areas of Valsad and Surat Districts. At one place, I came across a pucca house situated amidst mud huts. When I went in I found that a small embroidery unit had been set up. The corporation had given them a sewing machine and they embroidered different motifs on saris. From the earnings they had bought a second machine and they were planning to buy a third one. The saris they embroidered had found a good market in Mumbai, and many retailers came to them to buy their goods. They had built this pucca house from their income. I saw on one of the walls a photograph of Gurumai. Though I knew about Gurumai, I wanted to find out from them. They said: 'We visit

Gurumai's Centre and do meditation.' I was happy to note that the tribal population is gradually moving away from their blind faith towards meditation. Then I went to the huts around the place and I found each household engaged in embroidery work. They said they could earn enough from this occupation. In some areas I found the people engaged in carpet weaving. But it distressed me that the carpets were being sent to Jaipur for the finishing process. If this facility was available at their doorstep then they could get a better price for their products. The year I became the joint director of cottage industry, the same year one crore rupees had been earmarked for a carpet finishing unit.

The corporation now provides loans for vehicles to tribal youth. As a result, many youths who know driving now ply taxis and earn a good living. The corporation had also given a loan to start a sugar factory as the main crop here is sugarcane. Some big dams have come up in this area and as a result much of tribal lands have been submerged. Though they have received compensation for the loss of land; many have wasted this money on drinking and have now become penniless and landless.

Most of the grants sanctioned for the development of the tribal population remain unused. At times by the year end almost 40 per cent grant is not used. This unused grants lapse every year. Most of the grant money that is used is spent on the office and administrative establishment, on furniture or on organizing functions—very little remains for the development of the tribal population. I suggested to the concerned minister, 'This unused grant should be handed over to the corporation, so that it remains there and next year if a need arises in any section it can be used.'

The minister was ready at that time to concede to my request. But later I was given the excuse, 'the finance department has rejected it'. I quoted the example of the district planning board grant. The government has allowed the district planning board to use the sanctioned grant for an extended period of three to four years. In the same way if the unused grant is handed over to the corporation then it could be used the following year. There was a positive response to my suggestion and the matter was taken up for discussion. This discussion continued even after my retirement from the corporation. In the government discussions continue

for years. Instead, if the government had acted on the suggestion, the corporation would have been able to put this grant money to good use. If somebody were to add up the entire lapsed grant amount the total sum would astonish any person.

On the evening of 30 September 1998, after thirty years of service, I retired from my profession. Generally, within two or three days of retirement, an official is handed over the gratuity and other dues from the government. As per rules, the process of readying pension papers should start about year and a half before the retirement date, so that the employee can receive his pension from the month after he leaves the office. In my case I got my gratuity money nine months after my retirement and that too, after several meetings with the deputy secretary and the secretary.

When the retirement date was approaching, the entire staff of the corporation came to meet me one by one. Then on the last evening they came in a group. The woman employees of the corporation also joined them. One of them said to me that they had introduced themselves when I had taken up the post but I did not remember their names. She was right. I did not know the woman employees by their names. Whenever I needed any help I used to call the branch head to my chamber and so there had been no occasion when I had to call anyone of them and thus I did not need to know their names. Everybody wanted to organize a farewell party for me but I was firm in my denial. I knew how the staff members were impatient to get home in the evening and a party would mean staying back. Secondly, it would also mean collecting money from all the employees and in times of high cost of living, making the clerical staff hand out Rs. 10-20 was not proper. I had never agreed even in the past, whenever I was transferred, for a farewell function. Some officials enjoy such occasions. Sometimes when a senior officer got transferred, I remember, the employees had to contribute Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 each. The function would be held at the headquarters so that the office car could be utilized. In the Tribal Development Corporation we had regular review meetings with the district officials every fourth and fifth of the month. So the corporation chairman decided to hold my farewell function after one such review meeting. No contribution was collected from anyone. In government service farewells are routine

affairs. Irrespective of the fact whether the officer is liked or disliked, everybody says excellent things about him. How often I was forced to be a silent witness at such functions! Not only that, I also had to give speeches.

In the past, officers and the general staff had to retire at the age of 58. In the central government the retirement age now is 60. In the state government, regular staff members retire at the age of 58, but for the officers who are in the central government administrative services, in spite of being state government employees, the retirement age is now 60. Had I been nominated to the IAS cadre I would have retired at 60. Thus I had to retire two years earlier than I would have. But though it was a loss of two years in my professional career, I remained as active after retirement as I had been when I was working. By the time I retired I had published two novels, two collections of short stories, and a collection of essays. In 1994, as I have mentioned earlier, I founded the Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Sabha and under its auspices organized lectures on various topics by eminent people. I have now introduced various competitions for essays, short stories, and poetry. On 29 April 2001, I had invited Dr. Ramanlal Joshi to give away the prizes. On this occasion, the former vice chancellor, Dr. Dilawarsingh Jadeja, released my collection of short stories *Rati Rayan ni Ratash*. Mr. Kanayalal Pandya, secretary, Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, spoke about the stories dealing with gender issues and Dr. Keshubhai Desai, vice president University Granth Nirman Board, discussed the stories related to dalit consciousness.

Many officers frantically try to acquire a suitable position after retirement. I know of an officer who was from another state and he had spent his entire career away from his family. Many in the service had thought that after retirement he would go back to his family he had left behind in his home state, but that did not happen; instead he somehow found a vacancy and joined the service again. My friends at the secretariat said that the most surprising factor was that the person who had created an uproar against this officer in the previous Legislative Assembly had helped him to find a place after his retirement. The administration badly needs an infusion of fresh blood. How much harm individual interests and personal desires have caused it! Once I came across a retired

officer who had joined as a PA at one place. When I was in his office his boss was absent. I found him counting rosary beads as he chanted. I remembered Akho's famous lines:

> Fifty-three years wasted away in daubing the forehead with holy mark. Even the rosary beads have given way.

I strongly feel that the retirement age for all employees should be 55. Look at the performance of our courts. Why is there such a back log of cases? The retirement age there is 62. I feel that only when fresh blood is pumped into these organizations their working will improve. I have come across many officers who after the age of 55 slow down and drag themselves about during the working day. They suffer from various physical ailments and are immersed in family problems. Their personal conflicts will have a direct fall out on the administration. Many find it difficult to spend time after retirement and so they keenly await any chance to get back to the department from where they have retired. For some who had been extremely busy during their service period and had spent most of their time outside, adjustment with the family becomes difficult. Many family members are not willing to accept them back! How often I have heard a wife complain, 'We were better off when he was working!' Such officials are then forced to seek their 'Godfather's' help. After a great deal of pleading and ingratiating themselves at their feet they are placed somewhere in the administrative framework. Religious institutions are a favourite place for many. Some, who had helped these institutions while they were in position, get an easy access in these places.

My long association with Raj Bhavan had prompted some people to ask me whether I had found a post. Sometimes when people see me at the secretariat they too ask me if I have a post somewhere and I would smile and reply, 'At home.'

The immediate reaction would be, 'Why haven't you been placed? You know so many people.'

I would smile and look at the person and then say, 'My being a dalit comes in the way.' In some rare cases where one or two dalits have been given extension or new appointments after retirement, they soon find a conspiracy fermenting against them. They would be accused

of personal or family interests. It does not stop there. The news is splashed on the pages of newspapers as well.

From the time I joined government service I lived the life of a government servant. I have now retired from that life. I have lost my parents, Motabhai and Bhabhi in all these years. My children today are all well settled. My elder daughter is a government medical officer. She had a good academic career throughout. In the tenth standard she had secured 85 percent and stood first in her school in Palanpur. The school had a tradition of honouring the students who secured the highest marks in the Board examination but in Dharitri's case because she was from the scheduled caste she did not receive any recognition. She was deeply hurt. However, she was felicitated along with other bright students and was given a prize by a scheduled caste welfare organization in Ahmedabad. After her twelfth standard she joined a medical college. Here too caste formed a big barrier in her progress. She could clear the MBBS examination on the fifth attempt and as a result of it she could not pursue studies for an MD. Even after becoming a medical officer she had to put up with many obstructions. Based on her experiences I wrote the short story 'Dr. Seema'. My younger daughter has MA and LLB degrees and at present lives with her husband and two sons in Bangalore. My son, Bhargav, has completed his MA in English. He had secured 71 per cent in BA and had received two prizes from the university. At present he is a part time lecturer at Samarpan College in Gandhinagar.

When I married Hasumati, Bhargav was just five months old. My two daughters have never been able to accept their step-mother, as happens often. Though they all grew up under one roof with Hasumati, tension exists between my daughters and my second wife. As a result there is a constant tension within myself, adding to the many trials and tribulations that I have had to face. At times I am under so much stress that I am tempted to consult a psychiatrist. But then I know what the doctor would tell me. He would ask me to stop worrying but only I know how difficult that task is. I now have hypertension and diabetes and so instead of a psychiatrist I have to regularly visit a physician!

As I have mentioned earlier, in 1959 my first story *'Rati Rayan ni Ratash'* was published in *Chandni*. Before that I had won the

second prize in 1956 at a story writing competition at Vansda. In the 1960s, my stories came out in *Navchetan*, *Savita*, *Kankavati*, *Lokmat*, *Gujarat Times*, *Aarsi*, *Varsha*, *Pathik*, *Pravasi* and *Lokveena*. There were enough published stories to bring out as a volume but I had not been able to do so. In 1967 I got a prize in story writing competition conducted by *Stree-Sandesh*. In 1995 my novel *Shed* was published and in the same year one of my stories was awarded a prize in the story competition held by *Gujarat Samachar*. On 30 October 1998, my novel *Mool* was awarded the second prize by *Sandesh* in the Shri Ishwar Petlikar Novel Writing Competition. Navbharat Sahitya Mandir published this novel under the title *Mool Ane Dhool*. Now I am ready to dig deeper into the roots of literature and so for me retirement does not mean a time to become inactive; rather it is a time for renewed activity. Two of my collected works—one of essays, *Gai Jo Dero* and the other of short stories, *Janamdivas!*—have already been published. For me literature is not a means to earn name and fame but a serious endeavour. Sometime back, Dr. Ramanlal Joshi rang me up at 11.30 in the night. When I picked up the phone, he asked if I were awake and I said that I was reading. He then asserted that he knew I would be reading and hence had rung me up!

We talked for a while and when I put down the receiver, I suddenly thought of Dr. Ambedkar. Whatever I have achieved in my life, it has been only because of him. I recalled an incident from his life. An English official had once telephoned him very late at night. When Dr. Ambedkar picked up the receiver, the Englishman said, "Mr. Ambedkar I rang up many leaders at this time and everywhere I got the answer, 'he is asleep'. I could only get you on the phone.'

Dr. Ambedkar had replied, 'My community has been sleeping for years and so I have to keep awake for them.'

What an inspiring force he has been to the innumerable people in every facets of life! And how many has he awakened from the centuries old deep slumber!

My moholla in Kalol is located in an area known as Gai no Tekro—the Cow Hill. Mohenjo-Daro, the Mound of the Dead, inspired me to write an essay called '*Gai jo Dero*' which I later included in a volume of essays bearing the same title. The Indus

Valley civilization is now lost in the past, whereas the civilization of '*Gai jo Dero*' is a present-day reality, which was brought to light by Dr. Ambedkar. He was the one who acquainted the country and the world to this reality. Some years back I visited Mumbai with my family. We went to pay our homage at Dr. Ambedkar's residence—*Rajgruh*—and *Chaityabhumi* where he had attained *nirvana*. These two places have become the pilgrim centres for the dalit communities. I never miss a chance to visit these places when I am in Mumbai. When we visited the place we were told that on his birth anniversary on 14 April and his death anniversary on 6 December, there is a long queue of people waiting with flowers hoping to pay homage to this great man at *Chaityabhumi*. When I entered the grounds of *Rajgruh*, I felt a thrill go down my body. I bent down and picked up a fistful of earth and touched it to my forehead and put a mark on my forehead. My eyes welled up with tears. My children looked at me with wonder in their eyes. But then they had neither seen the reality of '*Gai jo Dero*' and nor experienced its pain. The ruins of this living reality of '*Gai jo Dero*' have turned into a *shool* and the thorn remains pierced in my heart.

'If you were to knock on the words of pain, you would hear the sound of truth . . .
If you were to dig into them, you would find blood streaking out.'

This is how B. Kesharshivam describes the quintessential experiences of the life of a dalit.

In the sixty years after independence, many believe that much has changed for dalits. The author himself, born and raised in poverty in the dalit moholla of Kalol in north Gujarat, passed the Gujarat Public Service Examinations to become a mamlatdar, a revenue officer, and finally a Class 1 officer who held many significant postings including comptroller of the household to the governor of Gujarat. Yet, as he says, 'At every step in life I was made aware of being a dalit.'

Translated from the Gujarati original, *Purnasatya*, this is the first autobiography of a dalit in Gujarati. Beginning with his life as a child who plays in the dust of the bone meal factory, where he later works, going on to labour with his parents in the 'cotter mill', the book presents a non-sentimental account of a childhood where friendships exist, sometimes across castes, and discrimination and abuse are constants. The second part of his story relates to his working life, his struggles on behalf of the dalits and the tribal populations against a backdrop of continuous discrimination. As the author questions accepted norms and verities, he forces readers to confront themselves.

B. Kesharshivam is the pen name of B. S. Jadav, which he coined by combining his parents' names and placing Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's first initial in front. He has written many novels and short stories, getting published while he was in school. His autobiography won the Dasi Jivan award of the Government of Gujarat, 2003.

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